Short Stories of Fairy

By Basil Kernander

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From the very beginning, they always were there. They are here now. They shall be here long after us, until the end. When they touch you on the cheek and gaze into your eyes, you are truly lost. You cannot return. You discover that you do not wish to return…ever.

Dedication

For all the children – whether small or grown – who never stopped listening for footsteps in the forest, laughter in the hills or stars in the deep pools of water.

For my family who share the joy of living and finding mystery in the world.

Acknowledgement

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Author's Note

The express purpose of this collection is purely an exercise of writing to amuse. Eleven stories in this short book are inspired by the tradition and geography of Wales. Two are set in other locations. The photographs are entirely my own and intended to set the mood rather than depict any actual location.

I do not profess to be a linguist nor do I have any proficiency in the Welsh language.

For those desiring to use elements of another language in a story, there is the lurking risk of misusing terms and phrases for the purpose of lending authenticity. This is a linguistic crime of ignorance in which I hope to avoid.

In my desire to explore and write stories that are centered on Wales, I initially tried to include names, terms and geography as they might be in the Welsh language. The purpose in doing this was to keep the stories as authentic as possible, invite the reader to explore Wales and their language and tie names to larger ideas that are associated with names and places. I advance the argument that this is an appropriate strategy in reaching a larger audience who, unfortunately, is often chained to reading stories only through the lens of geography and language that fits their own expectations. I say 'unfortunately' simply because limiting exposure to the familiar often shuts out cultural exploration. This self-inflicted ignorance, I assert, leads to some of the discord we find today in reaching beyond that which we are comfortable to understand others and the world in which others live.

As I listened to family members who read some of my writing, I quickly recognized that the complexity of pronunciation of an unfamiliar language such as Welsh has the potential to interrupt the flow of the story. Given that the stories are designed to be fun and simple reading, I elected to use Welsh names that are more familiar in spelling and pronunciation than those that reach back to earlier periods of this great culture. Thus, using names like Boreugwyn, Fflamddwyn Guorthigirn on a regular basis would likely distract a reader more than permit a flow. Instead, I use more readily identifiable names that I suspect are more pronounceable and fitting for young readers. Names such as Osian or Severus do not present as great a temporary roadblock in flow.

There are instances, especially in Geography, where I lack the skill to discern a way around the spelling. For a region like Snowdonia Wales, the name is straight forward. For a town's name like Betws y Coed, I have found no good work-around save erasing the name altogether. I feel this would be a discourtesy to those whose country I am using for inspiration. Thus, certain geographical names of towns, rivers and lakes remain as they are spelled.

In addition, I refer to certain elements in the stories like Tylwyth Teg as little as possible and use a more generic description thereafter which is fairy folk or specific type of creature like hound, hag or appropriate term.

Having said that, I feel it is vital to impress upon the reader that using the term 'fairy folk' is a poor but necessary substitute for a large category of beings. There are many types of fairies, some good, some impolite and rude and others downright nasty and malicious. One would make

a terrible mistake of saying they are all similar. They are, in their own respect, as varied as the nations and cultural groups found around the world. Terms like Coblynau mean dwarven folk in Welsh. But this can be misleading since used in a slightly different context and tradition the word dwarf would be different in Norse tradition yet both are related to mines. The term elf is even more difficult since many elves are considered positive while in the Norse Eddas, dark elves sometimes, also referred to as dwarves, do not have the same likeable characteristics. I suspect the writers and story tellers of ages past would scratch their heads at the depiction of dwarves in the world of Disney. It is no secret that J.R.R. Tolkien expressed an intense dislike of the Disney movies and refused to allow his works to be used for Disney's ideas.

That aside, readers must use context of behavior and description to separate the differences. Depending on the culture, both might be called fairies, but they are hardly the same any more than King Arthur is the same as a hunch backed and treacherous Ephialtes.

The reader will notice that many of the stories seem to repeat some of the same introductory elements as if one has never read a fairytale or heard any of the contents. This is deliberate as my approach is modeled from those tales told in generations past. One can reasonably conclude that storytellers in past generations knew of this repetitive habit but that doing so reinforced particular ideas such as antagonist/ protagonist, cause/effect and particular moral and cultural lessons that were deemed essential to understand.

I eagerly encourage the reader to explore public domain works on Welsh Folklore and Fairytales. There are numerous books on the subject which I have included at the end for suggested reading. The stories here are entirely of my own creation though the subject matter of behavior and values is old as humanity.

Severus and the Shepherd

Here follows a tale of a most peculiar shepherd who tended a small flock of sheep. The locals knew the old fellow and remarked how he had always kept to himself and never ventured into the village for supply or for market. He always sported a bright colored coat and hat that were long since out of fashion and a beard so long that it well neigh swept the ground. Many of the folk, knowing he did not come from their village or the neighboring villages, suspected he was one of the Tylwyth Teg, or fairy folk, from the nearby Gwydir forests. They could not, however, ever seem to be able to prove the suspicion.

It was rumored that he had a small house in a dell that was deep in that forest but no one had thus far been successful in discovering such a place. He was thought a good shepherd since he had a fine-looking fold of sheep with thick black and white wool and a several magnificent cows. He was observed using a harp and singing sweet tunes to his charges and spoke to them as if they were his own children. He was always courteous to any who approached him and swept his hat low in greeting. Though many an elder approached him, they never seemed to be able to draw much information out of the man.

The young village children also would visit into the pastures where the happy shepherd would greet them with waves and laughter. He was, by contrast, much more engaging with children and seemed to have the exuberant spirit of a child. Elders plied the children with questions but were unable to determine anything except that old man had spoken to them with grandfatherly gentleness and provided them with the most excellent stories. They said he seemed to have a sparkle in his eyes, broad smile and almost musical voice and contagious laughter. They brought him flower chains, cleverly made woven dolls and the occasional honey cake which, apparently, exceedingly pleased the old man. In exchange, he harped them the most wonderful music they had ever heard and gave them water from a strange skin that was the sweetest and most pure they'd ever tasted.

It so happened that there was also a disreputable man named Severus who was known to have a nasty temperament and lived on the outskirts of the village. He had his own small dwelling, flock of sheep and pasture that he tilled for oats. He was miserly in all things except sneers and rudeness that he generously provided to anyone who crossed his path. He avoided the village folk as much as they avoided him. Both neighbors and Severus seemed well satisfied with this arrangement. His first wife died some years back. Most of the folk recall that she was a pathetic scroungy looking woman that had close set beady eyes and a perpetual scowl that would curdle fresh milk. She and her husband were great consumers of strong drink and sang loudly and out of tune when imbibed.

For all their noisome habits, most people agreed the two found some strange satisfaction together and were no doubt perfect for one another. When she died of a fever, it came as no surprise that Severus was lonely and embittered. If the phrase 'misery loves company' were ever true, he was the reason for it. It was reported that he had journeyed to other villages to find a new wife but was always rebuffed. These rejections, owing to his ill-favored and sullen look, did nothing for his temperament.

Having no wife with whom to share his troubles and table only caused his bitterness to grow. He taunted the village women with grinning leers and narrowed eyes. No one could stand to look at him for long since he habitually clicked a set of blackened teeth and wheezed with a strange gurgle that tainted the air with a nose wrinkling odor. Sporting a thick black beard, he never cleaned the food from it. If any of the children strayed near his dwelling, he would chase them off with threats to thrash them with a broad leather strap he wore as a belt. After the death of his wife, he was left with only two companions which were a sad lean hunting dog that limped around and gaunt and malicious looking nanny goat that had a milky film over one eye that oozed thickly from a disease.

The goat, curiously named Owain, had one spindly horn missing and a hoof that had a split that looked curiously like a finger. It was observed that while the dog seemed to be of a gentle disposition, the goat was its opposite. The neglected hound, named Gelert, would give a friendly wag to passersby while the nanny goat bleated and lunged, at whomever walked nearby. There was something sinister about the goat as if it was not altogether what it seemed but some witch in animal form. Indeed, the few times the children had seen the goat and dog near each other, the dog had growled with its hackles raised and bared its teeth at it and the goat repaid the dog with the same coin in bleats and lunges. Many a person muttered that the goat had an evil eye and that witchcraft was at work. More than a few nodded in wry agreement observing that it was after the wife had died that the eye had turned bad.

Though it was hardly worth the expense, villagers once or twice had tried to buy or trade for the poor old dog. Severus had merely laughed scornfully, rebuffed them with a dismissive wave, and bid them a good day. The goat, it seemed to many, seemed almost to smile as Severus dismissed them.

One afternoon, Severus was plowing his field for bristle oats with a mule. The mule, the one thing he did respect, belonged to another farmer who gladly accepted Severus's coin for its use.

While plowing, he saw two of the young village girls that were about eight years old coming back from the pastures. Eva and Brin were singing and talking of the little old shepherd's music and kindly nature. Severus blocked the dancing girls, hands on hips and demanded to know of whom they sang. They did not wish to betray the kindly old man to Severus and at first refused to say. He grew dark with spite and threatened to thrash them with his belt for being disrespectful. For added effect, he whipped the belt off and held it menacingly in one gnarled hand. They shuddered at his discolored teeth snapping wolfishly. He was so close that they winced at his glare fought the urge to gag at the stench of his breath.

In fear of Severus's threats, young Eva blurted out a brief description of the shepherd and the general area where he might be found.

"Eva!" Brin hissed in dismay, but it was too late.

Severus looked past them and grunted in satisfaction seeming not to have heard the child's rebuke. He lingered a few moments longer and looked at the girls as if trying to determine the truth of their claim. Satisfied at the information, he made a sudden move and shout as if to grab the girls which sent them scurrying away with a shriek. He doubled up with laughter as they fled. He would pay the shepherd a visit that night.

The girls, once out of sight, stopped to consider what to do. Eva, feeling bad for her telling Severus where their friend could be found, quickly agreed they must warn the little man. Choosing a different route, they quickly ran back to the shepherd who listened intently to the girls and smiled in a kindly fashion then patted them softly on their heads. He produced a beautiful flower from behind each of their heads as if by magic and gave it to them whispering something to each. At first, they protested and shook their heads, but he merely smiled and put a hand on them reassuringly. Reluctantly, they went by Severus's home a second time. He saw them coming and was surprised. Accosting them again, they did not let him get close but told Severus the shepherd should like to meet him that night. Before the surprised Severus could reply, the girls darted away to home, glad to leave the loathsome man who stood gazing after them and puzzled at the turn of events .

They told their mothers what had transpired. The mothers, disgusted by the bad manners and unseemly behavior of Severus, spread the word. The men agreed that nothing good would come of such a meeting. The women were thoroughly enraged with Severus and his treatment of the girls. They insisted that there could be no peace until the troublesome villain should be chased from the village. As it was late, however, all agreed that that nothing should be done until the following day when a delegation would pay the man a visit and matters settled.

An eager Severus waited 'til nightfall and made his way towards where the girls had said the little shepherd could be found. He downed more than his usual libation of strong ale and put a knife in his belt and a stout cudgel in his hand. Severus reasoned that one of the fat sheep this man raised, if the rumors were true, would make a fine meal and have excellent wool. It would be, of course, simply a demand for an overdue tribute to using the village pastures. The fact that it would be completely for Severus and that no such tributes existed was of no consequence. A

few threats to keep the old man quiet and that would be that. If the man proved troublesome, well there was always the cudgel to give him a good drubbing.

He staggered his way across the numerous hillocks and sloping pastures glancing about for the man's flock. The moon was full and sheep would stand out easily. He must have walked for miles and was growing weary and frustrated. He began to suspect the two girls had lied to him and have a great jest at his expense. He would settle accounts with them soon enough when he saw them again. But then, he began to hear soft music. Lolling his head about in confusion, he glanced towards the nearby old growth forest where he saw the faint glow of light and where the music arose. Smiling with satisfaction, he staggered on into the woods yet he never seemed to get any closer. His ale skin was empty and he was becoming increasingly thirsty. After continuing in the forest for some time, he was sweating, muttering, and cursing. Curiously, however, the lights and music seemed only father inside the forest as a glow that beckoned him onward.

After some time, he paused and looked about. The pastureland was no longer visible from behind and for the first time had a shade of doubt. He was aware of the stories about this fairy haunted wood. Waiving his arm dismissively, he staggered forward wiping the sweat from his brow and cursing that his shoes were now leaving blisters and coming apart. He discovered his knife had fallen from his belt and was now lost. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but finally he began to get closer to the source of the music. Quite suddenly, he stumbled upon a clearing where beautiful people were dancing about singing and celebrating. There were fruits and drinks and the sweetest of smells. Forgetting all else, he lumbered forward with bewilderment and was swept up in the dancing. He was exultant. No one seemed to care about his haggard appearance. For hours, it seemed, he danced and sang while thoroughly intoxicated by the beauty of the setting.

His eyes then settled upon a maiden in a white flowing gown with a coronet of colored flowers crowing her head. He was filled with desire. He made his way to her and saw a glitter in her eyes. She reached out her arms and swept him away in dancing. As his head swam in the merriment, his desire grew greater and he decided he must have her as his wife. She would make him forget all his loneliness of the past and bring him an excellent reputation and gladness.

Suddenly, he spotted a man with a sweeping beard and bright colored jacket and hat. He approached the man and he thought, "Surely this is the shepherd I've been looking for! He must be wealthy. Perhaps this fair maiden is his daughter. I shall soon determine the matter of things." He asked the little gayly dressed man if he was indeed the shepherd the girls had met and if this marvelous maiden were his daughter. The little man confirmed what he suspected and Severus was exultant. Quickly, he asked the little man for the maiden's hand in marriage. But the little man surprised him with a gay laugh and told him, "This is not the kind of wife that you would want. She is nimble in her steps and stout hearted in wrath. You do not know her? Perhaps another would be more suited to a man such as you."

Severus, not liking being laughed at, began to grow angry since he did not need this little man to tell him what he did or did not need. Severus peered at the young woman and had to admit there

was something familiar about her but he could not put a finger on it. But he waived his hand wildly in the air, "I know what wife is best for me I should think and not you! She is glorious as any flower here and sweet as the water you give to me! I simply must have her. I know how to handle a wife."

Seeing Severus's determination and injured pride, the old man again burst out laughing and doubled over slapping his knees. Those around him laughed too and raised their glasses to Severus. "Truly," several shouted, "a man who knows himself and a bride fit for him!" Severus glanced around at the uproar uncertainly but when he saw the cheerful smiles and clinking glasses, he smiled back and laughed aloud with joy.

The old man shrugged then bowed low sweeping his cap and revealing a shock of red hair, "She is yours to marry. Love knows no limits and a fitting bride is always to be found for a deserving groom! You have proven yourself more worthy than most. Let kindred souls unite."

Severus was exultant. The old man leaned forward and spoke again, "She is your willing bride. Indeed, she espied you the moment you entered, albeit unbidden, and was smitten as a lost love reunited. See how she blushes! But I warn you, you must keep her safe and never strike her. She will serve you well and keep your house warm and cheerful I'll warrant!"

Severus nodded eagerly hardly believing his good fortune. He only half listened to the admonition since already the revelers were striking new songs, pouring new wine and setting up a grand wedding.

The old man clapped his hands and called out instructions to the others gathered there. Glorious flowers and garments were brought forth for the ceremony. Severus was donned in finery the likes he had never seen and soon his blushing and glowing bride was brought to him. The rites were completed in a fashion unfamiliar to Severus and the language unknown, but his desire was great and the effect of the marvelous wine strong. They placed a laurel about her neck and a ring up on her finger. Gifts of gold and silver coin were brought to the couple and there was great merriment.

Severus stayed with the people enjoying the soft gentleness of his new wife who matched his eagerness in love. He lost all track of time and everyday was a celebration with plenty to eat and not a care in the world. To his amazement, he discovered that most of the time, these people lived deep in a cave where there was light, houses, and gardens. These folk indeed had the most marvelous sheep and cows that made his desire for greater wealth increase. He had never known such joy and pleasure with his first wife and his new one satisfied his most delighted dreams and warmed his soft bed with joy and a blanket of warmth.

After a time, however, he grew restless and at time grew weary for he now had plenty of gold and silver coin but nowhere to spend it. He longed to have peace and quiet in his own home and have a large home and large flocks. He would show the other villagers a thing or two. He told the old man his intentions and that he expected some of the sheep and cows for his own. His wife implored him not to leave as he did not know what he was asking. She told him he would be unhappy all the rest of his days. Severus, at first, relented but then increasingly desired to leave

and grew ill-tempered at delay. On the festival of mid-summers eve, he told his wife that he was resolved to return and that as she was his wife, she must be obedient and move to his household where she would want for nothing.

Telling the old man of his resolve, the old man nodded and gave him a number of fine sheep and two splendid milk cows. He put his coin in two sacks and prepared to leave. She need not worry, he explained, she could visit her family whenever she wished for they would be rich and have whatever they desired. Though he was older, she would bear him fine sons that would make him proud.

She grew sad, then cross while fretting about miserably. She shook her head, "You do not know what you ask. We will find no peace away from here in your village. My place is here. Stay and let us live together in happiness. Love me as I am here and we shall be happy for countless years."

This displeased him greatly. "Ungrateful wife," he barked, "you will do as I see fit." In wrath, he boxed her upon her cheek. At this, she turned cold and told him that his wish would be fulfilled. He might have said more, but instead immediately fell into a deep slumber.

The morning after Severus had gone in search of the shepherd, the villagers gathered and moved as a group to Severus's home. He was nowhere to be found and while his dog came out from under a fallen log and weakly wagged its tail, there was no trace of the goat. Fearing the worst, they set out towards where the shepherd was known to keep his flock. The children led them to the spot and called to the man but there was no reply nor any sign of sheep. One child produced a knife that he found in the grass. All the searchers concluded it belonged to Severus but they could not understand why it had been discarded. They journeyed on to the edge of the forest but would not enter. They called for a while and walked the length of the forest edge but eventually gave up and went home. There was no sign of Severus, that day or for months to come. Curiously, some days after Severus had disappeared, the dog disappeared too and was presumed to have finally wandered off to die. It was a sad end to a creature that did not deserve to endure such a vile owner.

The children continued to go daily in search of the shepherd and his flock but they always came back disheartened. This only added to the conviction of the villagers that Severus may well have murdered the shepherd and fled the countryside. His goat was gone. While the old nanny was not missed, the village folk were puzzled why Severus made no effort to take his few sheep. Some of the men watched over the sheep that Severus had abandoned. After tending them for a month, the villagers agreed that Severus had forfeit any claim to the remaining sheep due to the expense and care that was given. Promptly and without dissent, the animals were divided among the villagers. They let the house fall into ruins.

For months after, life seemed to get back to normal. The children once again wandered through the hills and meadows day after day. One day, however, they heard music again and dashed to and fro looking for the old man and found him where he had usually let his flocks graze. They all danced together in celebration and the old man plucked out gentle tunes with his harp. Out from behind the sheep a dog bounded into view healthy, happy, and barking wildly with joy. It

wagged its tail furiously with pleasure. The children gaped in awe. Barely recognizable, it was nevertheless Severus's old hound that had undergone a marvelous transformation. The old man swept his hat from his head and tossed it high in the air. Not losing a moment, the hound, seemingly reborn, leaped in the air to catch it from a height that didn't seem to be possible. Retrieving the hat, the old man replaced it upon his head and the dog went to sit by the sheep. The old man presented all of them with flowers and they raced off to home to spread the news.

Severus awoke in the woods uncertain of time or where he was. The sunlight was streaming through the trees hurting his eyes. He felt his face and realized he had a long wild beard. His clothes were ragged and dirty. How long had he been asleep? On one side he found the sacks of gold that the old man had given to him. "It was not a dream!" he shouted in joy. Quickly, he upended the sacks to see his treasure. He stared in disbelief as cockle shells poured into a heap on the ground. Upon hearing a stirring, he looked to his side and beheld his nanny goat. His eyes went wide in horror. As he gaped at the bedraggled beast that looked back at him and bleated excitedly with a sparkle in its one good eye. A garland of withered flowers was about the goat's neck and the hoof with a finger like projection had a withered ring made of vines affixed to it. Severus saw a matching ring on his finger. On the goat's gaunt face, there was a distinct hand print as if from slap. His gift of sheep was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a flock of angry fat crows rose up from the ground as a cloud and began to peck at his head. Severus leapt up in horror at the realization and fled deeper and deeper into the forest with his wife of many months bleating energetically after him. Neither he nor the malicious goat were ever seen or heard of again.

Death Hounds

Now there was a certain village in Cymru in Ceredigionshire two days ride from Aberporth and one day's ride to Llanteulyddog or Carmathen as its now known. The village had seen the Irish, Roman, Saxon, and Norman peoples come go over the many centuries. Now this village was not particularly prosperous but the people were decent and hard-working. They broke the soil, sowed and reaped oats, peas, potatoes and a few other crops that grew well. Meat was not so common but there was food enough with barley bread, cheese, milk and especially miner cakes.

The people were respectful of the traditions of the land and made a goodly effort to appease the fair folk that resided there long before the first Celt first set foot in the green valleys and ancient forests. From time to time, it was told, the area would flood because of a wicked type of fairy called a Morgen. For some, particularly those awakened by water coming in the door, this knowledge and any warning was quite important. Villagers and river dwellers would say that one of the dreaded hounds of darkness called a Gwyllgi had been seen. This terrible encounter inevitably meant that soon floods would occur. Some believe that the Morgen sent the hounds to frighten people into moving from harm's way. Few ears, if any, believed that such a kindly warning was given the ever-treacherous Morgen. In fact, so terrifying was the appearance of the Gwyllgi that more than one person died from fright when seeing their gigantic and hideous appearance. For most people, the beasts were always were a portend of death.

Now there was a certain village family of good reputation and well-disposed to the kindly ways of the people of Cymru. A youth named Dylan was enamored with Meinir, the daughter of Osian and Mellangell. The parents of Meinir were agreeable to the couple to be bundled. Now bundling was the custom of having the prospective spouse spend the night but with one of the youths sewn up to their neck in a sack to avoid getting too close to one another. The bundling of Dylan and Meinir would take place on mid-summers eve after the festivities.

Dylan was returning from another village with cheese and a spiced mead which were often a favorite part of a meal. His mule, Harry, plodded along the familiar road carrying the goods on his back while Dylan felt the contours of the love spoon that he planned to give Meinir. Dylan was especially skilled with wood which made him desirable as a prospective husband. As of late, he and many others spent no small amount of time anxiously watching the continued heavy rains and swollen river. The fear by all was that the rising waters would swiftly expand beyond its natural banks and spread. All knew this would not have been unusual for Mogen to cast her net to catch the unwary.

Now night in Wales is mighty dark, unlike the cities today with lights so bright that even the stars are blotted out. But this was long before the village knew of such changes. Tonight, however, was cloudless and the starlight with the moon were especially pleasing. He smiled as his fingers traced the wood and thought about the events to come tomorrow that would include dancing around the may pole, singing and feasting. Glancing about, he admired the moonlight bathing the trees and lighting up the glades and fens. He vaguely felt like he was being watched, but not by anything bad. He knew the fairy folk were about, the good ones, who watched from around trees. He knew that the hidden people could not resist a good celebration and would be in attendance disguised as visitors.

Harry suddenly yanked on the reins.

"What ails you Harry," asked Dylan gently caressing the animal's neck. The mule stammered nervously and snorted with alarm. Dylan reassured Harry with a gentle caress. "What do you smell old friend. This road is familiar to you," continued Dylan, "Tis only the moon and trees and the river over in the distance. Does your hoof ail you? Or are one of the hidden people pulling your ears or tail?"

But Harry, in his own mulish way, did not find the matter funny at all.

Dylan reached down and started to inspect the animal's foot but then heard a sound. Now, Dylan understood. He put his hand on the beast's neck and continued to caress but looked towards the river and heard a wail of an animal.

Harry became almost ungovernable. He sensed a danger and it is no secret that animals often sniff out danger before people and have the good sense to run away from it.

Dylan was not sure what it was but if it was a wolf, they had good reason to be concerned since they seldom prowled alone but in packs.

"Shh," cajoled Dylan who slowly worked his way back to a sharpened billhook he used to prune wood.

"Quietly now," Dylan said more to himself than Harry, "We will keep going but keep an eye out. The Morgen may be working her mischief sure enough. If it's wolves Harry, they may not have caught our scent. Last I heard, they don't take to mules like you on account of the mighty kick you can give. I've heard of more than one that found his teeth a furlong away after a good knock to the snout."

Dylan and Harry continued but with a slightly quickened pace. For anyone watching, one would have seen the anxious Harry that was doing the leading and Dylan following. For a while, there was no further sound of any beast or strange noises. Then there was a definite howl and much closer. The sound was a drawn-out wail that came through the trees. They were walking on the cart path in the meadow but the road passed under the canopy of dense trees ahead. The woods no longer seemed friendly and Dylan grew uneasy about entering the dark shadows ahead but there was nothing for it; it was the only way home. Off to the left, he heard the crashing of something huge through the forest brush. This time, Dylan was startled so badly that he nearly jumped out of his skin. For Harry, that was it. He bolted forward, yanking Dylan forward and throwing him to the ground in a heap. Harry dashed forward, cart bumping wildly behind him and did not stop running until he reached home.

Dylan scrambled to his feet and ran a few feet to try and catch the terrified mule but gave up. Walking back to retrieve his sharpened tool, he slowly started following. Dylan proceeded only a short distance in the woods when a bone chilling howl arose from behind. Spinning about defensively and raising the blade he spotted the biggest Mastiff he had ever seen. It was enormous, crouched and in shadow. There was little detail save bristling, raised hackles and glowing yellow eyes. His eyes went wide with terror as the hound regarded him with interest. The eyes seemed to flash fire and Dylan saw rows of sharpened fangs appearing and disappearing behind a lolling black tongue that whipped in and out. At first, the giant dog simply looked at him, but then it raised its head in an unearthly wail that shook Dylan to his bones, made him feel weak in the knees and drop his billhook in despair. Dylan's first impulse was to flee, but he stood riveted to the ground and did not move.

The hound then looked around and bounded off into the meadow. No doubt it was on some other deadly errand now that it had delivered its fateful message to Dylan. Many minutes passed

before Dylan could move and let his pounding heart settle. When he roused himself to move, he made haste through the woods to his home. He looked at his hand and it was bleeding from where Harry had yanked the lead from him and he realized he had forgotten to retrieve his billhook. The journey took him the better part of an hour in the darkest part of the woodland path. Stopping in his tracks, his heart skipped a beat. He heard barking and voices calling his name.

"What new devilry is this," said Dylan with a start and now dreading a new spectral encounter, "Was it simply letting me think I'd escaped only to come back and gobble me up when so close to home? "But then he understood this barking was different. Farther on down the path, he saw eyes bobbing up and down, many eyes. He started to flee back the way he came but stopped when he heard several voices calling his name. Pausing, he looked more carefully and realized he was seeing the flicker of flames moving to and fro. Looking with confusion, he sighed with relief upon hearing the voices of people he knew. His brothers Calcas and Tristan, his father and Meinir's father, Osian, and brother all came up with sharpened farm tools in their hands. Another neighbor, Tudor had brought his hounds who barked and raced about excitedly in warm greeting to Dylan.

"Dylan!" shouted Calcas, who had a deep booming voice.

"Gods be praised," said Meinir's father Osian, "we feared the worst for you!"

"Harry came running up to home as if Morgen herself were upon his heels," said Tristan, "When we saw that you were not with him, we gathered to come and look for you."

"I've seen the death hound," said Dylan glumly having had time to collect himself, "Morgen must have sent it. Harry and I heard it get closer and then it appeared behind us. Poor Harry was smarter than me and faster. He could smell its foul breath long before it showed itself."

"Harry and other beasts know danger before we do," said Tristan.

"Aye," said Dylan, "he was terribly affrighted and nothing I could have done would have stayed him. He was faster than me even with that cart. But the hound did me no harm."

"No," said Calcas dismayed, "The dark hounds need not do you any harm. It is the messenger. Harm will come soon enough."

"The devil hounds," said Tudor taken aback, "that's ill tidings indeed."

A howl rose in the distance stopping all Tudor's dogs in their tracks.

"By Morgen's tangled hair, that the very beast or I'll be an English Yaldson," said Dylan.

Tudor's dogs suddenly howled in answer.

"Let's be off before he comes back," said Tudor nervously, "Quick before he puts a spell on my own dogs."

Without any fanfare, the group began the trek back at a quick pace to the village where they related the events of the evening to shocked family. A portend of death, a bad death, was on

everyone's mind. It was to be hoped, however, that such a death might not come on midsummers celebration, if at all.

Midsummers went by with great merriment, dancing, singing and feasting. Food and ale were plentiful and no small amount of storytelling and gossip took place. Only three brawls took place and one poor besotted fool thought he could shimmy up a tree but was rewarded with a twisted ankle. That evening, Dylan went to Meinir's home. She had been beside herself with worry over the events regarding the death hound but, like the others, had managed to enjoy the holiday. Dylan presented his carved spoon which she happily accepted. It was placed on the wall with great honor and more eating and drinking took place.

That night, Meinir was sewn up to the neck in a sack within the bedroom where she and Dylan would spend the night. The rest of the family took to their beds and soon the cottage was dark.

At the blackest hour of the night when all was most still, Meinir's mother, Mellangell, awoke with a start. Gripping her husband's arm, she croaked a warning.

"Osian," she said, "do you not hear the death hound! It is about as young Dylan said."

"Quiet woman," said Osian irritably who turned his back, eager to resume a most welcomed slumber.

"The devil hounds are about I tell you," said the woman upon hearing a second wailing hound.

Osian said nothing but made every attempt to return to sleep despite his wife's protestations.

For a while, the sounds were heard no more. Then the wife beat on her husband with renewed alarm.

"Get up Osian, you sluggard," she said urgently, "do you not hear them sniffing about the house! They've come here. Get up! Get up! Someone is sure to die tonight."

Osian, half asleep, listened to the sounds and snorted. "'Tis nothing but the neighbor's cur or perhaps a goat sniffing about the house. Go to sleep wife and stop your fretting."

There was, however, no sleeping for Mellangell. She lay petrified in bed knowing that the death hound was just outside the front door sniffing about.

"Care you nothing for your wife and children?" said Mellangell urgently, "do you not hear them scratching at the very door!"

Osian, having been twice awakened, was now awake and irritated. Nevertheless, he listened with greater care. Indeed, he heard sniffing, scratching, and the padding of feet. Finally, he sat up and reached for his tinderbox and a stout cudgel he kept handy.

In the other room, Dylan and Meinir had been awake for some time and were also were listening.

"Dylan," said Meinir frightened, "do you hear that outside?"

“Indeed, I do,” said Dylan shaking, “Surely the hound has not tracked me here this very night. Someone surely must be about to pay their final debt. I must see if it is the same infernal creature.”

He rose from her side and moved to the shutters.

“By heavens no you foolish man,” hissed Meinir in terror, “do not open the shutters. You would let it in to finish its task.”

“I just want to see to be sure,” said Dylan who with shaking hands reached up to the latch. He gently opened the window and peered about in the inky black. Nothing except distant owls and night insects. He sighed a great relief and closed the shutters. As he started to put the latch back, he heard a faint sound outside. At first, he froze. Then, mustering his courage, he peeked through the crack. Behind him a faint glowing light from Meinir’s tiny lamp began to fill the room. Dylan sighed heavily and began to relax, “Nothing, it’s nothing Meinir.”

A shriek leapt from Meinir’s mouth and a cry of shock and dismay flew out of Dylan as he was suddenly bowled backwards. Meinir barely had time to register the massive creature that exploded through the shutters and into the room. He was knocked over which sent the lamp scattering on the floor and dousing the flame. The house erupted in pandemonium. Screams of terror and dismay filled the home followed by the sounds of crashing furniture and crockery. Meinir thrashed about screaming when she felt bristly hair sweep past her, “God’s help me, I’m being beaten and trampled to death.”

Osian sprang to his feet with Mellangell close behind and dashed into the cooking area. The kitchen was black as pitch and the couple staggered about blindly. Mellangell bellowed a cry of terror as something huge landed upon Osian and sent him spinning blindly into his hapless wife. Both of them landed against the kitchen table upending it and sending everything flying.

“Save me,” shouted Mellangell desperately, “I feel my own blood flowing down my head and the hound is licking the blood from my neck.”

“Gods help us,” shrieked Osian, “There’s more than one of the devils!”

The collision sent Osian sprawling upon his back. He felt the great hooked claws of the devil beast trample his chest and leap on to the scattered dishes. He wondered how he had not already been torn to pieces and gave thanks to the heavens that he had escaped the jaws of the terror now ripping and tearing at everything in sight. Frantically he groped about for his cudgel which had been knocked from his hand.

The sound of slobbering, thrashing, slurping, bones crunching and broken pots filled the night. The family cringed in terror as the sound of sliding and scraping about left them helpless, each thinking the other had been claimed by the portents of death.

Finally, the sounds ceased. For a long time, nobody moved. Osian, knowing that the most was expected from him as master of the house, crawled about and finally found the tinderbox. Striking the flint, the sparks revealed a flash of total wreck. He shrieked in horror as he saw two

luminescent eyes and rows of teeth in a black creature that started at him with its tongue lolling out.

Then a curious thing happened. He heard the padding of feet and braced for the imminent and horrifying death that was surely about to come. But no death came. He heard a slight panting and the felt a tongue licking his face. For a moment, he remembered his wife and her claims of being devoured with her own blood flowing down from her head. But feeling no fangs plunging into his neck. He reached to his face and felt a smooth liquid. Touching his fingers to it he smelled and tasted it. Unlike blood, it had the curious similarity to milk. He did not remember blood being so sweet. Plucking up his courage, he struck the steel again and realized it was one of Tudor's curs that was licking the tasty milk from his face.

Finding a wrapped cloth, he managed to light a tallow candle and look about. He beheld a large dog happily wagging its tail and looking well pleased at the booty it had gobbled from the callops and upended stewpot. Food and broken pottery lay scattered about as if the very heart of a storm had been within his home. His wife was pale and passed out from fright but had no blood upon her anywhere. Instead, there was gravy from the cooked rabbit mixed in her hair. Outside he heard the running about of the neighbor's other hounds that must have been co-conspirators to the raid. Leaping to his feet, he looked in upon his two small children and their brother who were cowered together in a corner wide eyed with terror but none the worse. His biggest surprise, however, came from finding Dylan holding Meinir. She was not within her sewn up sack at all and despite the great terror that had filled the home, she had a look of surprise and dismay that was more akin to guilt. Squinting at the couple with a suspicious eye, and despite protestations to the contrary, he was not entirely convinced that she had been frightened out of the sack.

The Mine Boy

In a certain valley in Wales, a few of local men still seek gold within the earth in the mines found in Cothi Valley that has a river of the same name. The Romans first set to delving into these hills seeking riches. More often now, men have sought the seams of coal rather than the elusive yellow metal. While it is not remembered how well the Coblynau, or dwarven folk, got along with the people of ages past, the Welsh miners of today know better than to offend them. Such wise and hospitable attitudes, however, have not always been honored.

Once, a landowner of an abandoned mine from Roman times was desirous to try and make the mine productive again and brought in skilled miners who needed work. It happened that after some period of effort, the men of the mine were all frustrated at the poor results. If there was no production of gold, then there was the real possibility of the labor being dismissed. Now these old tunnels went deep and were not like the more well-crafted mines of today. They were narrow rough passageways hacked and gouged from earth and stone that descended deep into the ground.

Now there was a certain young man who was working in some of these deep tunnels. His father, named Hywel the good, was no stranger to the perils of mining. Unfortunately, Hywel had the misfortune of stepping in a narrow cleft in the rocks that clutched his ankle and threw him down. He broke his leg and shoulder and there was doubt to his being able to return to the mines. Hywel had a family to feed and this was naturally of great concern. It fell to his eldest boy, Carwyn to keep money coming in. Now Carwyn was strong and able at the age of 14. He was prudent, considerate and used to hard work but was not as experienced as other miners. The mines were no place for his younger sisters and the family soon found itself in dire straits.

Although Hywel was well liked and a good and honest man, he was sometimes ridiculed for being a bit old fashioned and keeping traditions and rituals to please to the mystical fairy folk, especially the dwarves. While sympathetic to his situation, many of his fellow could not resist pointing out that all those traditions had earned him naught but injury and the inability to provide for his family. Undaunted, he and his mother told Carwyn to be sure and always be respectful to traditions. Carwyn, seeing his father's injuries, had his doubts on their effectiveness but reasoned that rudeness never brough prosperity to anyone.

The older men and other boys slapped him on the back good naturedly and took him under their wing to help him provide for his family. Encouragement and sympathy turned to disbelief and scorn when they observed the young Carwyn following the same courtesies and even going so far as to set out bread and cream for the fair folk. Though many people had their traditions and superstitions, the idea of wasting good food in a quaint ritual for a mystery people when your family was in need was senseless. While not ugly towards the young man, the others gradually had less to do with him and suggested he work lesser used tunnels to be apart from him. Some began to think that such queer habits might actually bring disaster upon themselves as it had Carwyn's father. While unhappy, Carwyn never ceased following his parent's wishes.

It fell upon a cloudy day when a rather ugly and short man in odd miner's clothes fell in beside him as he walked to his labor. Carwyn often walked alone now and was left to his thoughts. The man was kindly, however, and sported a long beard, wizened face, and strong hands.

"I've seen you walk alone now for some weeks," remarked the man in a gentle voice, "why not with your fellow miners? It's no good to work a mine alone, especially this one."

Carwyn sighed, "My father was hurt in the mines and now we are facing poverty and losing our home. The others miners have been kind enough and even helped when they could. But they now make fun of me for following in our traditions of showing respect to the fairy folk. Now they mock me and even say I may bring bad luck since the traditions we follow brought my father nothing but ruin."

The ugly man sighed said nothing for a while as they both walked on. "That is an unfortunate business about your father," he said, "Mines bite and swallow men just as men bite and steal from the earth with their tools. It wasn't tradition and showing respect that caught your father's foot, it was the jaws of a rock. Make no mistake my boy, they bite and sometimes worse. It is a good thing you do in showing respect. Honoring your father and traditions is right and proper and I shouldn't wonder if your fortunes change some day."

The two walked to the mine and went inside. The other miners had already gone in and were headed down. "I've not seen you here before," said Carwyn, "I know all the other miners and we are a small village."

"Oh, I have been around these parts for a long time but travel to different mines seeking treasures," he replied with a smile, "Often, I arrive early and leave late with a nap in between. I've been in this line of work for ages it seems. I'm pretty used to passing among rocks without making much noise. Have to be careful and pay attention or I end up as your father. So, I'm so quiet I might easily be missed. I shall go to see where you work if you do not object."

Carwyn's face brightened, "Please do, I should enjoy the company very much for I have naught but myself to keep me company. Sometimes I think I even hear the walls talking to me for it is so dark and quiet."

The small man smiled, tilted his head and nodded but made no reply.

The pair went into the mines and off in the direction where Carwyn worked. Every so often his companion would stop and tap on the walls as if to test it for solidness. "All the seasoned miners say this these tunnels have been stripped of gold and that is why we go so deep," said Carwyn.

Carwyn's companion merely smiled, grunted his understanding and occasionally tapped. "I've experience at this sort of thing too and have a fair ear about things that has served me well on occasion. Knocking on the walls can tell you a great deal and it takes lots of practice to hear the stones talk back to you."

"They talk back to you?" said Carwyn mystified and beginning to wonder if the little man had been in the mines a little too long by himself.

"In their own way," said the man perceiving the boy's expression of doubt, "If you strike a cow, it speaks. If you strike a bell, it speaks but not as a cow speaks." He paused and pointed to an ordinary chunk of rock on the wall. "This rock doesn't have much of a tongue no matter how you knock it about. It's just as liable to try and put your eye out than to give a proper greeting. Now gold, silver, tin and copper, they speak a different note when you knock on their door. But sometimes it is very hard to hear them speak back. A lot of the ore you and I want is behind rock that muffles their sound so it comes through like a whisper. If you don't listen really carefully, you'll miss the reply."

"So maybe I am hearing them speak after all?" said Carwyn bewildered and not completely understanding the little man's description.

The old man smiled and shrugged, "Who can say for certain, but if you do not listen for such things, you certainly will not hear them or understand them."

After some time, they arrived at the place where Carwyn spent his hours. He set his lamp upon the floor and began to work. After some time, he looked around and noticed the man had wandered off but he could hear the tap tap tap of his explorations. He did not see the aged miner all day and only when he came out in the evening did the man reappear to walk with him.

"I saw where your neighbors were working," the old miner began, "They might be onto some good ore but I don't like the sound of the place. The earth groans and shifts where they are but they do not hear it. The rocks can tell you a lot more than you might think. There might be danger down there and they should move higher up. They looked at me and dismissed me when I told them. For your sake, don't go working down there no matter what. If you can, try and talk sense into them."

"Danger," said Carwyn alarmed, "what sort of danger."

"I can't rightly say just yet," admitted the old miner, "it's what I see, feel and hear." The two walked silently on for a while until the shorter man bade him good night and walked away down a path in the woods. As Carwyn watch him go, he scratched his head in curiosity. There were no homes in that direction. But he reasoned that the man had his own reasons. Back at home, Carwyn described his day to his parents and his new squat friend. They looked at each other knowingly and told him that he must be one of the dwarves. They told him that he must listen to the little man and do what he said. They were most troubled by the mention of danger but had little choice but to permit their son to return to work.

For the next week, the old man walked to work with him every day and his pattern in the mine repeated itself. The old man did not carry much in the way of provision so Carwyn always set out a share of his meal. The old man returned the favor by sharing the most luxurious tobacco for their pipes. Each day, the old miner seemed more concerned about the mine. One evening, when it came time to part, the old man turned gravely and instructed Carwyn.

"My lad," he began, "I've been concerned about a danger and now I'm certain of it. One of my distant kin has come calling. He is a miner like me but portends danger. I do not see him often but when he goes to mines, it's a warning. I saw him only last night and he shook his head and

tugged on his beard in worry as he told me of danger. Tomorrow, I must be elsewhere. But above all, if you must leave the mines if you hear three taps, for he is never wrong."

"But what kind of danger," asked Carwyn urgently, "I have come upon a small bit of ore that will help my family. I should be a poor son indeed if I turn my back on this chance."

Carwyn held up the rock for the man to examine. Turning it this way and that with a keen eye, he smiled and nodded, "Aye, its good ore. But you must listen to me."

The small man shook his head, "I am not sure of the nature of the danger, my kinsman would not say, but anyone in the lower tunnels is at risk. He would only say that the earth groans and its bones are breaking. In the depths of mines, there are many dangers. As to your family, they will not be well supplied by your death, will they? Remember what I told you and do not fail me."

Before Carwyn could reply, the older man turned and was gone into the woods. From a distance he faintly heard the little man's voice again. "Remember! three taps."

That night after he showed them the small chunk of ore, he related the warning of the dwarf. Despite the discovery of ore, they were beside themselves with alarm. They feared for their son's safety and that of their neighbors. Additionally, their rent was due. The owner of the land had already been patient considering the father's accident but could not simply let them live there for free. They had nowhere to go.

"You must at least warn the other miners. They shall be at the tavern. We have known them long and it would be unthinkable to at least not let them know. Some have even helped us these past weeks." his father said.

"What should I say?" said Carwyn with dismay, "a little, wrinkled odd man told me there was danger? One of the fairy folk told me? They shall demand proof and suspect I'm trying to work their spots. They ridicule me already for the traditions we keep and I'd be a laughing stock if I'm wrong. They shall chase me from the mine."

His father and mother understood the young man's hesitancy and not wishing to be publicly humiliated, but still felt that at least giving a warning would put them on guard and a chance to be ready.

Reluctantly, he went to the tavern where the men gathered after work to drink and smoke their pipes. He did not go there much anymore so it was a surprise when he showed up.

"Well met! Carwyn!" said one, "come at last to your senses and to join us in drink and a smoke or are you still feeding the mouths of those little people? Come now, why the wrinkled scowl? We mean no harm by it."

Laughter broke out though it was good natured.

"I came to give warning," Carwyn said. "Warning?" said one sitting up and frowning, "warning about what?"

"The mines, they're unsafe and there is danger," those present eased back with a laugh.

“Aye indeed, Carwyn!” a man name Alec, “we know that already. Your father can tell you if you have not learned that by now. Mind you my lad, we do not make fun of his injuries.” Alec raised his hands placatingly, “We know well enough that misfortune is not choosy. But perhaps putting faith in mystery diggers and delvers didn’t serve your father very well. Who told you there was danger? What sort?”

Carwyn hesitated, “A man I’ve not seen before who has come to the mines with me. He has mined a long time and can tell what the rocks say. He has walked with me to work for some time now.”

The laughter died down. “Oh Carwyn,” said a fellow name Grigor, “you’ve been working alone too long in your tunnel. We’ve seen no mystery man. Tell me, is he a smallish man and in funny clothes?” Snickers began to break out in the room. “Does he go around tapping rocks yet never finds a thing? Where does this fellow live?”

Carwyn was turning red with embarrassment, “I don’t know exactly. He comes and goes from the woods near the river.”

“Aha!” said, Grigor, “it settled then, the danger comes from dwarves who seek to steal our jobs boys! No one lives down there.” Laughter erupted in the room filling Carwyn with shame.

“He’s lost his mind, Grigor continued, “and every bit his father’s son. Hard working and decent yes, but possessed by the little unseen folk!”

Carwyn’s shame turned to anger and he clenched his fists. “Make no mistake. I did not wish to come here,” he growled in defiance, “My parents said I had to since we know all of you. I was told that danger was there and that you should not go down to your spots deep in the mine tomorrow. I came to help you, not be sport of your laughs. I was to warn you and I have done so! Do as you will.”

He turned and left the tavern barely restraining tears from the bitterness he felt.

“Carwyn!” some yelled feeling the young man’s bitterness at being mocked, “come back, we mean no harm. You must understand us! Come let us buy you an ale! You’re one of us.”

It was no use, however, Carwyn was already out of the tavern door. As he walked in silent bitterness, he started when he heard a harsh croak. Looking over at a fencepost, he saw a startlingly large black bird, a raven. It cocked it’s head this way and that, bobbed up and down and seemed to regarding Carwyn. Carwyn stared back at the bird which was growing blacker in the twilight. It croaked again and few away over the treetops. Carwyn’s bitterness gave way to sadness for he knew a raven was a sign.

Not all of the men in the tavern were laughing however. More than a few felt guilty for the boy’s situation was bad enough that he did not need to be laughed at. Some of them knew Hywel and his family and deeply respected the man. They had been raised on the same traditions but had grown to set them aside as foolishness.

“Maybe we should stay home tomorrow or work in a different tunnel,” suggested an older miner name Rhys, “My kinfolk knew a thing or two. Maybe there is something to it. Besides, I did see a little fellow the other day down there. He mentioned something about danger but I paid him no heed. I had never seen him before and assumed he was a new miner.”

One or two others had quit laughing as well. “Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to be safe,” said a man whose name was Osian, “My wife believes those stories and she would be sick to death if she knew what that boy said. It would be just for a day. There is no harm in taking care. He said tomorrow, nothing about the day after.”

“Mine too,” nodded a bear of a man named Dylan, “Just had the third child and couldn’t stomach having something happening to them because I had fair warning and ignored it. Besides, Rhys says he saw that fellow so maybe there is something to it.”

“You can’t be serious,” said Grigor flabbergasted, “One superstitious crippled man, his gullible son and now Rhys saying he saw this little fellow that no one else saw? Well, I’m having none of it. If anything, the superstitious boy has infected you Rhys for no one else saw it. Sometimes the air is bad and one goes to seeing things. The boy seems to have had his fill and maybe Rhys has been breathing it too, or maybe too much drink. I’ve a family to feed for the owner expects ore and we’ve seen precious little of it. This madness is spreading worse than a pox.”

Grigor downed his ale and slammed the tankard on the table looking at other men, “I’ve got rent to pay so I can keep a roof over my head and so do you.” Several of the others muttered and nodded their heads in agreement.

“Don’t glare at me Rhys,” Grigor said, “I meant no offense. I know you’re a solid fellow like the rest of us. The landlord isn’t going to wait one day out of charity and our bellies need bread and meat. True, he’s been patient with Hywel and we’ve done our share too in order to look after our own. The rest of you do what you want, but I’ll not be cowed by silly stories. Such tales won’t put food in your bellies or quiet your babes that cry for milk. Try telling the master that business and see how long he will spend coin on us while we yield nothing but buckets of folk tales and fear.”

Most of the men likewise had lost their jolly moods and began to leave. Some, like Grigor, were dismissive, but others seemed troubled.

The following day, Carwyn arrived at the mine early. True to his word, the little man had not come. All the other the other miners showed up.

“There lads,” said Grigor, “what did I tell you. This is the first sensible thing this boy has done. He came to work rather than listen to those tales. Seems we talked sense into him. What I want to know is why he would come when he was telling us not to?”

The others seemed puzzled at this too and waited for an explanation. Carwyn was confident in his reply, “I told you there was a danger in the deep tunnels,” he began, “I came to tell you to listen for tapping. Not tapping one of you makes but from somewhere else. I don’t know, just

listen for them. There are other tunnels that you could work in the mine. He said the earth groans and its bones break."

"Yes," said Rhys cutting him off still feeling sore from Grigor's rebuke the previous night, "that have no gold. The only bones that will be breaking are our backs on worthless rocks."

"Not true," said Carwyn calmly, "I found ore in the west tunnel."

Several heads leaned forward with keen interest.

"New ore?" said Rhys, "how much?"

"It was a small amount," he admitted, "and I worked all day to get it, but it's there and seems to promise more. It was getting late."

"I've heard enough," said Grigor, "Maybe there is some ore there, but those tunnels he works were mined ages ago and likely has little to show for the effort. I thought maybe he'd come to his senses but I see not. My sons and I will go down and not listen to any more of this."

Grigor and his three sons plus a good number of others went down, some hesitantly.

"Three taps Grigor," Carwyn urged, "listen for them."

Grigor waived his hand dismissively over his shoulder and marched on.

Dylan, Osian and several others, however, decided to work in the upper tunnels though they knew there was less likely to be success.

When the day had largely passed without incident, Carwyn sat down to eat. Most of the initially reluctant miners had decided to go farther down to join the others. They now felt foolish for having listened, but none mocked him.

Carwyn sighed heavily then stopped. He listened intently and heard a tap tap tap. Holding his breath, he listened again, tap tap tap. It was unmistakable. He leapt up from his seat and raced towards the lower tunnels to warn his neighbors. It was no short distance to the lower tunnels where the men worked and he could not risk his lamp going out. He rounded a corner and collided with a squat man with a pick. He had never seen this man before. The squat man was also a dwarf and was even uglier than his little companion of previous days. Though for all his unsightliness, there was a face of hard experience and kindliness. The newcomer merely smiled through a deeply creased face and thick beard. A twinkle sparkled in the dark eyes. He tipped his hat and walked past Carwyn back towards the upper levels. Suddenly, the ground shook and deep cracks sounded far below that sounded like dried cow bones violently snapping. He was thrown down but came to his feet and staggered forward in a near panic with the ground buckling under his feet. He was too late. He turned and bolted back the way he came and eventually came out with his chest pounding and drenched in sweat. Nobody was there.

He flopped on his back and stared at the evening sky in disbelief. Suddenly he heard faint voices and coughing. Staring at the tunnel he eventually saw a glow of light and the sound of voices. The miners all filed out covered with thick dust. After a head count, Carwyn found that

everyone was present. Grigor came out last. He walked over to Carwyn pale and shaken. He put a gentle hand on his shoulder, “We heard the taps as you said Carwyn. There wasn’t a man down there that wasn’t thinking all day about what you said. When we heard them, we started running and not a moment too soon. Water suddenly burst through and flooded the tunnels. We would have been drowned to a man if you hadn’t told us. We owe you a debt we can never repay. I for one should very much like to have a good ale and smoke with you at the tavern, and Hywel if he can manage. I will carry him there myself if he's not too proud.” Silently, they all went home but each man put his hand on Carwyn’s shoulder in thanks.

After all the men had passed and were out of sight, Carwyn glanced over to a tree. Sitting on a low branch was the same large raven cocking its head in observation. It seemed to be waiting for something. Not knowing what to do, he bowed to the bird, “Thank you.” The bird, whether it understood him or not, did not reply but slowly arose and few away.

The next day, the dwarf Carwyn had first encountered met him at the mouth of the tunnel. “I’ve found a spot for you to try”, he said. “You were right,” said Carwyn, “there was a danger and the tunnels flooded.”

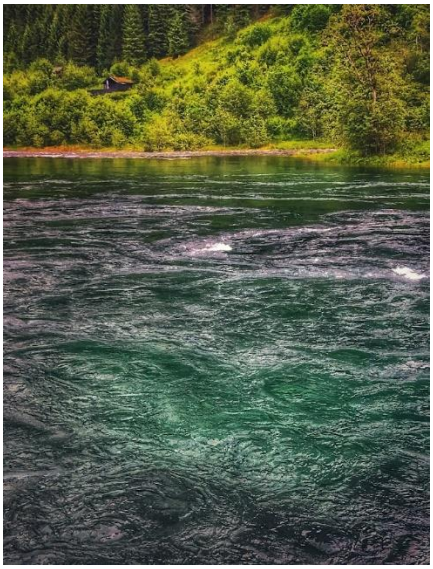
“Course I was right,” he said disinterestedly, “I’m always right. That’s not the trouble. The trouble is that people won’t listen when I’m right. Ah, here is the spot.” and he pointed to a slab of rock against a wall that had a small niche carved into it with letters carved from long ago.

“But this tunnel is near the surface and has had gold taken years ago,” Carwyn protested, “This is where old miners carved their names, or at least that’s what we’ve always been told.” The dwarf simply smiled and shrugged his shoulders, “the stones speak.”

Carwyn went to work and battled with the stone for hours as the dwarf sat, smoked his pipe and watched. Finally, he pulled the rock back to reveal a cavity. When he held up his lamp, he gasped. Inside was a cache of golden coins someone had hidden ages ago. Spellbound, he turned to thank the dwarf but he was nowhere to be seen. When Carwyn heaped the treasure on the table at home, his family was overjoyed. There was enough to tend to his family for some time. As to the mine cave in, the assumption was that a link to the nearby river Cothi had burst through. All the lower tunnels were drowned in the river’s waters.

Carwyn was generous and he shared the cache of coins with the miners who now had lost their most promising place to mine. All of them had the good sense to keep the discovery to themselves. In addition, the small ore sample Carwyn found turned out to be a decent new vein and provided good work for all the miners. None dared question the need to respect the dwarven folk and they showed immense respect and gratitude for both the traditions and Carwyn’s family for the rest of their days.

Einion and the Fairy Flower



There was a young lad, Einion, who frequented the meadows of Conwy Valley that abutted a stretch Gwydir Forest known to have delighted the appetites of sheep. This was close to the small village of Betus y Coed. Often, he would see the fairy children playing and occasionally would join in their revelry and play his harp that he always brought to pass the time and soothe his sheep.

When arriving home late one evening, his mother was ill-pleased at his tardiness and scolded him for staying out too long and causing her great worry. He explained that he was playing with children wearing the most colorful clothes and who were always at the edge of the forest singing and dancing. He explained that he had become great friends with them and they shared food together and had a way with the sheep that calmed them.

His mother, suspecting these were fairy folk, sternly warned him against playing with them as they were no doubt fairies that would spirit him away and he would never be seen again. That would leave his parents in grief and his younger brother and sister were too small to manage the flock. Now not all fairy folk are bad. These fairies were the friendly kind and often did nice things to folk who were nice to them. They, like anyone, enjoyed clever games and occasional mischief but this was all in good fun.

The people of the valley, however, were right to be suspicious of all manner of fairies since one could not always be sure exactly which type fairy might be present or what they might do. There were numerous tales about fairy rings and people disappearing only to return years later. Knowing this, Einion reluctantly agreed to the admonitions of his fretful mother but by the next morning, he put aside any promise to avoid them. Still, he knew well enough to avoid the fairy rings that could be found here and there.

Every time the fairy children would approach him, he was always very courteous and complimentary to them. Most folk knew that above most things fairies valued, good manners and hospitality were chief among them. Despite his mother's concerns, nothing bad ever happened and the sheep never strayed but grew fat and had fine wool.

One day, it happened that one of the fairy children, Brin, showed Einion a carved wood figurine of a beautiful and graceful lady that had been made for his sister Tegan. Brin explained it was an image of their beloved queen whose likeness was carved in a strange wood that was black as the night sky. Einion marveled at the creation The eyes seemed to glitter on their own like stars and the wood sparkled and shimmered. There was something clearly magical about it and drew his eyes deep into its star filled darkness. Its polished and smooth surface reminded him more of water or a window that had a depth behind its surface that was hard to fathom. The Brin gave the figurine to his sister, Tegan, who was delighted and all the fairies began singing and dancing. Einion and the fairy children continued their merriment for so long into the evening that Einion knew he would be late again.

His mother was again fraught with worry and correctly guessed the reason he was late. Once more, she rebuked and chastised his disobedience and gave warning to him with the added threat of a good beating should he disobey further.

The following day, he found the fairy children but they were sad. The Tegan had lost the figurine and they had been unable to find it. Einion immediately joined in the search. Despite searching all day in the in the meadow, they were unable to find it for the grass was deep and lush. For many days they looked on the nearby hillocks, in the woods and again in the meadow but found nothing. One afternoon, the fairy children were not present as they were wont to do in their own peculiar ways. Einion set about to play his harp, when he heard an answering sound like harp stings. Puzzled, he stopped and the music stopped. He played again and once more the sound began. Curious, he played his harp while walking about and finally happened upon the marvelous carved figurine. Picking it up, he found that although it was wood, it was heavy as stone and had been carved without evidence of a tool. When he played, the sparkling inside the wood shimmered and danced and the stars inside seem to move and flow in many different directions, sometimes close to the surface, sometimes moving farther away inside the darkness of the wood. The music that he made with it was beautiful beyond anything he had heard. Even the sheep quit their occasional bleating and stopped their grazing to pay attention.

The next day, he went to the meadow to return the figurine for he knew it was a special creation and Tegan dearly loved it. The fairies, however, were nowhere to be found. For days he returned seeking them, yet they did not return which distressed him greatly. He practiced day after day in the meadow hoping his friends would hear the music and return. As he played, he grew better and more skilled. He was drawn into the figurine that was teaching him how to play marvelous music seemingly by placing unseen gentle hands over his to teach him touch and form.

After two weeks' time, he decided to show his family both the figurine and his improved skill. Surprised and delighted, his mother and father were naturally alarmed by the magical figurine but assumed it was a gift. After hearing his harp playing, they were deeply moved and marveled

at the music that stilled the very air and forbade interruption. They realized that they might make money with his son's newfound treasure and improve their daily lives

Acting upon his parent's insistence, Einion played for the village and all were amazed and deeply touched by the sound. The parents were careful not to tell the people just how Einion had come by the figurine out of caution though many suspected. At once, they urged Einion to approach the noble court and secure a place for himself as a bard for the king. Numerous village folk reminded him that a bard was indeed a well-respected man and such a position would indeed bring honor to his family and village.

Einion, however, was feeling sad for he had no wish to go to court or sing for kings. He knew himself too well and desired no such changes. In his heart, he preferred the quiet meadows, sheep herding and time with his fairy friends. He missed the music, dancing and singing and knew the fairy girl would weep over the loss of her brother's gift. Einion was resolved to see what had become of them and went from the meadow into the forest to search for them. As if by some inner voice, he sang to his sheep and they seemed to understand they were to stay and wait for him and not wander off. He went deep into the woods and grew tired after a fruitless afternoon of searching. He sat beside a small pond of the clearest water where golden leaves from the approaching fall were floating.

As evening fell, he placed the mystical figurine in his lap and played his harp. All the woods echoed with the sound. When darkness fell, he placed the sparkling black wood beside him and was captivated at the almost celestial twinkling on the smooth surface.

As if by impulse, he said aloud, "My friends, I have searched for you and cannot find you. I have found your figurine and am returning it to you. Be not sad!" With that, he put it next to him as he stretched out on the ground. He took golden leaves and, on a whim, formed a circle around the little figurine, then fell asleep.

He awoke to gentle hands shaking him awake. The young fairy girl and her brother were laughing merrily and she danced about with happiness cradling the figurine of the fairy queen. All around were torch lights and many people dancing and singing. He had never seen most of these people before and there were bearded elders and women with beautiful gowns, flowing hair and skin the color of rich milk. They all shimmered in the light and fed him the most marvelous fruit and bread with sweet milk from fairy cows. The fairy lasses danced 'round and 'round with him and sprinkled silver dust on him with laughter while the lads tumbled and leaped.

A noble lady approached with a gleaming gem bound to her forehead in a circlet of green leaves over here golden hair. Her white limbs glowed with light and she bent down to kiss his brow. "You are most welcome here young master Einion," she said, "Honesty is well rewarded and great his he that knows his own heart and harkens to its tune! Behold, the joy you have brought. You do us great honor by mastering our music for only one of a true and pure heart may do so! Be glad fairy friend!"

Late into the evening, the fairy folk made Einion a warm bed of the softest grass and laid him to sleep.

When he awoke, he was in the meadow with his sheep. Knowing his mother and father would be upset and beside themselves, he worried all the way home. When he entered the home, his mother grabbed him by the neck in fright and reached for some briers she had gathered to thrash him. She paused however and removed his coat upon hearing a noise. Inside each pocket was enough gold and silver to provide for his family for many years. Overcome with amazement, she quickly forgot the briar switches and hugged her son. From thereafter, Einion tended his sheep with the fairy folk at hand without rebuke from his mother or father who prudently used the gifts from the fairies.

Laverbread

In Wales, in Snowdonia, there are many places of magic. The fairy folk were there before the earliest of the Celts set foot upon that enchanted soil and there after the Eagles of Rome withdrew. They were there after the Saxons. They were there after the Normans swept down under Edward Longshanks and after the iron and steam machines that choked the air and crisscrossed the land with rails.

The fairy folk were guardians of the land, content, unchanging and immune to the fickle habits and desires of mortals who are seldom satisfied with anything for long. Now among the fairy folk, there are many types. There are beautiful, joyful, singing, dancing, tender and wise folk. There are also ugly, rude, mischievous and unkind ones commonly known as goblins or, in other places, hobgoblins. Good fairy folk do not like being thought of as goblins nor hobgoblins as mortals sometimes unfairly label them.

In fact, fairy folk are rather particular in their company. The fairy folk have a delightful festival called Eisteddfodau where poetry, singing, dancing and storytelling are the center of activity. For the fairy kingdoms, this festival is of great importance and enjoyment and only the right kind of fairies are invited and the nasty mean goblin tales are not there to spoil the occasion.

Now when mortals arrived, they were a mystery to fairies. They were not the same. They lived but a short while by fairy reckoning, were clumsy, messy and often boorish in their dealings with others. But mortals could also be delightfully funny, laugh, dance, sing and be most hospitable. So, they were interesting and often could be good and polite neighbors. Consequently, in response to acts of hospitality and decent manners, the fairy folk might render aid to their human neighbors.

Long ago in a certain valley in Snowdonia, there was a season where the sun offered no mercy and the rains brought no relief. Plowing belched forth great clouds of choking dust and the few

miserable oat stalks that stretched into the light quickly withered. Sadly, only a few plants remained in great abundance but they were the unpleasant type. Black Henbane and nettles seemed to thrive both of which either which stank or stung. To make matters worse, these horrible plants were entirely unfit to eat. Some folk claimed the nearby mountain hag could be heard laughing at night and was responsible for these evil plants. Still others claimed that since she could not steal food, sheep or villagers to eat, she was gagging and sputtering with rage over these miserable plants as she tried to eat them.

Here and there, some measures of precious grains were grown but were immediately set upon and gobbled by desperate flocks of birds and livestock. Livestock wailed from swollen parched tongues and young shepherds fearing the death of their charges, were forced to travel farther and farther away to find water and fodder. Even the insects fled for lack of sustenance save, unfortunately, for fleas, flies and lice who well content to remain. Some claimed the large wolves were so disgusted with the pickings of scrawny sheep, goats and cows that they too decided to search elsewhere for better fair.

The hungry village children could easily have been mistaken for sad little wraiths that became visible only when sudden swirls of dust wrapped around them. When winter set, there was no more merriment or prancing about in amusement for little ones. Since there was precious little cheese, bread or milk, the bellies of many grew lean and the inhabitants became more skeletal with an ever-desperate search for food.

The fairy folk, however, were surprised and greatly dismayed at seeing their mortal neighbors in a such a plight as they seemed incapable of taking care of even their own children. Watching fairies found many a tooth which they thought were strange things to cast aside but then realized that they had fallen out of the mouths of the little human children for lack of sustenance. Fearing the children would want them back, they collected these teeth in a desire to return them from which it is said that later generations of human children created a strange sort of ritual with teeth placed under their pillows.

Seeing this miserable state of affairs, the fairies were uncertain what to do for merriment would not fill the lean stomachs of children nor bring relief to the livestock and flowers that groaned under the withering sun.

Though fairies had marvelous cows and sheep of their own, they were safely tucked away in fairy holds and domains where water and grass were forever plentiful. These were places that wolves could not sniff out nor humans find unless invited. Among humans, such an invitation was seldom given and never to ill-tempered and hungry wolves. As mortal folk would continually prove, this was a wise choice since humans were never satisfied with anything for long and had the distasteful habit of encroaching upon the domains of others.

One day in late spring, however, a certain family knew they could wait no longer to obtain sustenance. Too many villagers began observing corpse candles and other frightening portends of death. They reluctantly decided to send one of their daughters to the coast to try and obtain enough food to last until the rains would bring relief. Caiside, as she was called on account of her curly hair, was to try and obtain food from the coast. She would take the family ass named

‘Anodd’, which is another word for ‘tough’, several sacks and containers and do what was necessary to try and get help.

Anodd was a doughty beast and seemed to enjoy any chance he could get to travel. He was not as gaunt or sickly as his village brethren owing to the devotion of Caiside who frequently took him a goodly distance to get water and greener grass during these hard times. The coming trek would take several days and her family cobbled together enough food that, if wisely used, could enable her to reach the coast. Anodd, would find greener pastures the closer they moved to the coast.

The journey was to take her to a growing town called Cantref y Gwaelod in the lowlands. Now at this time, this important town was still growing and it wasn’t till many years later that it was swallowed up by the sea and is now under what is now called Cardigan Bay. That great tale is not for here but for another day. But the family knew that those living on the sea had a fresh supply of fish and might be induced to part some of their dried Herring and grain with the promise of repayment when times were better. For the people of this time, a word given was unbreakable and would have been regarded as satisfactory promise if reasonable terms could be concluded.

Caiside set out upon her journey with Anodd who had empty containers on either side of his stout back. Despite the months of general privation, the spirited animal seemed none the worse. After two days of travel towards the coast on a well beaten down cart path, the grass became thicker and had a lush green from refreshing morning dew. Anodd was occasionally given leave to graze to his heart’s content and cool his tired hooves on soft grass. Caiside, though mindful of her urgent errand, stretched out on the soft turf to rest or to sing to him. Her singing seemed to please the beast as he would occasionally look up at her and swish his tail in contentment. On the third day, they entered a dense forest of beeches, chestnut and Oak with broad leaves and healthy brush dripping with droplets from mist.

One day after travel in the wood, Caiside decided upon a large and ancient tree in which to rest under its protective eaves for the night. Close by, a lively creek ran its course. Along these refreshing waters, she and Anodd quickly refreshed themselves. Later, after building a small fire, she heard a small weeping sound. Assuming it was simply a bird, she simply listened and pulled out an oat paste from her diminished supply that would serve as her supper. When the sound did not stop, she stood up and searched through the trees and gnarled roots. Sheltered between two enormous roots, she discovered a boy and girl slightly smaller than herself sitting huddled next to one another.

Immediately, she felt pity and approached them.

“Where are your parents? Why are you out here all alone?” she asked.

“We have become lost and do not know our way back,” said the boy, “a clever root, no doubt planted by some wicked goblin, seized my sister’s little foot and threw her down. Now, she cannot walk and now we must surely perish in this dark wood for we have strayed far and cannot get home.”

“Nonsense,” stated Caiside, “I am traveling alone with Anodd and you shall come with us. I have my fire only a little distance away and will share my meager meal if you are not too particular.”

Gingerly, she helped the boy bring his sister to sit comfortably by the fire. She propped the girl against a large tree and tucked a wool cloak behind her back.

“It is not much, but it will fill your belly,” said Caiside who then divided her food and the remaining stale tasting ale that she had brought, “I am sorry I have no milk or cheese but I have traveled far and it would now be spoiled.” She then related to the pair the reason for her travels and plight of her village, its inhabitants and all its animals. The children, in turn, told of how they had gone out to play far from home and now found themselves in their current state. Once their bellies were filled, and thirst slaked, the girl and boy sang beautiful songs. Caiside was delighted by the sound of their voices and tales they told. ‘Surely,’ she thought, ‘they are much older than they appear for their tales are of many voices and they are well skilled.’ For her part, she sang to them. Although she did not think her own voice a match to theirs, they were delighted by the enchanting life in her voice.

When the new day reached its tendrils among the trees, the little group made ready to go. Anodd did not mind or even seem to feel the young injured girl as his passenger. Although she was hardly more than a sparrow’s weight upon his back, he took his duty with all seriousness and so as not to cause the young child discomfort. All day they traveled until the evening, when suddenly the boy piped up.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, “this is the path I well know and ‘tis but a short distance to my home from here.” Despite her searching, Caiside could see no other easily marked path but assumed the boy was about his business when it came to finding his home. “You wandered a great distance indeed,” said Caiside in amazement, “little wonder you became lost in the wily tangles of these ancient beeches and oaks for they are of a majesty and age the likes of which I have never seen.”

“It leads up into the trees and is strewn with big rocks,” continued Caiside in dismay as she followed the boy’s pointing hand, “If Anodd should venture up there, I fear he may be injured. I cannot carry him at all but should be forced to leave him alone to be devoured by wolves.”

“Fear not,” said the boy energetically, “wait here and I shall return in a short time, for this is the home of my people and no wolf shall easily find or waylay you among these hidden places.”

Without another word, he was off in a flash over and around the stones. He leaped over the roots and flew past the tree trunks with such skill that even a venerable mountain goat would have been shamed.

True to his word, he presently returned with a short-bearded man in a gay colored coat and hat. He smiled warmly, bowed low and swept off his cap in a flourish. Laughing, he helped the girl down who at once moved about with ease as if she no longer had a pain in the world.

“Ah you two have gone seeking mischief again and done well finding it!” he chided merrily. He turned to Anodd and caressed his grey head, “A fine job you have done my friend! To bear my kin so well and faithfully among root and branch, rock and stone. Surely you must be hungry!”

Before Caiside could explain the purpose of her travel, he produced a most curious bag and opened it to Anodd who sniffed and immediately put his nose in it to start munching greedily.

“Aha!” laughed the man with great delight, “a good hearty appetite! A fitting reward for one so generous.” The little man scratched Anodd’s ears. Anodd, however, was focused on the wonderous meal he had been provided. Caiside watched in wonder. No matter how eagerly the donkey ate, the small bag never seemed to run out.

“As for you my dear,” the man continued, “I have heard of the plight of your village. The waters that run throughout the land bring us news of all that dwell within it. The birds, beasts, butterflies and all manner of buzzing insects that have passed through these forests, for all their tattle tale ways, bring word of famine and misery. The very winds carry the groaning of tree, shrub and bush who lament their thirst.

Such a kind deed, as you have provided these little ones, should be rewarded with a measure in kind. I am given to understand that you are seeking provision for your family in the town of Cantref y Gwaelod. There the young king seeks to hold back the sea with his walls. Perhaps he shall, perhaps he shall not. But no matter, the sea delivers its bounty to his doorstep and a good bounty it is. I have no doubt that he will help as he can for, he is a kindly man and is not niggardly with his provisions. Still, he has his own people to see to and may be unable to provide enough.

We avoid our rude kindred in the sea but know that they have certain cakes that will help your people in times of lean. Seek out the shores where you shall find the grass of the seas upon its rocks. It is the grass of the sea yet shall sustain you in times of lean as well as any oatmeal. Fill your vessels with this bounty and bring it back here. Because you are in need and have shown us a great kindness, we should be most unjust in not helping you in your time of need! Be of good cheer and safe footing upon your journey for as you know, the feet of these trees will trip you.”

With this, the delightful man turned, retrieved his bag from a satisfied but reluctant Anodd and retreated to the inner recesses of the forest with a spring and leap. At the top of the nearby rim, both small children turned and waved energetically in thanks.

“How shall I find you?” Caiside suddenly cried out realizing that they would not know of her arrival.

Both children laughed, “We shall know,” they assured.

Upon reaching the lowlands, Caiside approached the roundhouse of the king, told the plight of her village, and was well received with sympathy and a satisfying meal. In trade of a few copper and silver pieces, she received a provision of salted fish that filled only a few containers. The

king was sympathetic and pledged to do what he could but other villages along the coast had already come to him for aid and he was already stretched thin.

Caiside then asked the king where she might obtain sea grass. The king and his advisors wondered at this request and inquired what the girl wanted with such a useless leaving from the sea. She explained her intention and it grieved the king and his court to think that the girl had lost her senses from starvation. The king, however, having heard of the secret ways of the fairy people, suspected there might be truth to the girl's story but said nothing. For his part, there was nothing more he could do for Caiside so he told her where the most plentiful amount could be found. He made her promise, however, that if it could be made into food worth eating, that she would return to him and demonstrate its use. Though he did not hold out hope, if it were true, he desired a new way to feed his people and he had vast amounts of sea grass.

Having obtained the good will and blessing of the king, she went to the edge of the sea and beheld the bounteous grasses of the seas. Giving heed to the instruction of the little forest man, she gathered a goody amount of this sea grass and set it to dry. Caiside smelled it and wrinkled her nose. She tasted it and found the sea grass most disagreeable. Anodd sniffed the sea grass, snorted and turned his nose. He would suffer to carry it, but for all his care, the village folk could have it. The grain from the little man's curious bag was a better treat. How in all the lands, she wondered, could such an evil smelling thing be eaten?

As Caiside returned to home, she passed directly in the domain of the little people that she encountered. Thinking that perhaps they might return to the tree where she first met them, she set up for the evening. Indeed, no sooner had she sat upon a great root to eat then she heard musical voices in the distance drawing near. The two children and the old man appeared with cheers and greetings to welcome her return. They brought forth sharp cheese, bread and a marvelous honey mead that swept away the aches and cares of the day. All laughed as Anodd put his muzzle on the old man's shoulder and nudged as if to remind the fellow that the marvelous bag of oats would be a welcomed meal.

"Aha! my good Anodd!" he said, "perhaps you'd thought I'd forgotten you." Once again, the bag was produced and Anodd chomped contentedly.

"You have returned with the sea grass," they proclaimed, "let us show you how to make it into proper cakes!"

"But the grass is evil smelling and spoilt," complained Caiside, "how can such a thing be shaped into cakes of food? No one shall eat them."

"Aha!" grinned the old man, "Just you wait and see. I did not say it would be sweet as milk or honey. But it will fill a belly and ward off the aches that an empty larder brings. Be patient my girl and watch!"

The old man pulled out a small cooking pot and showed Caiside how to mix, shape and boil the lumps into laverbread. He washed it in the creek and made a thick paste. Producing ground oats from a small pouch, he rolled it and explained the various ways in which the sea grass can be used with or without oats or with other foods. In Wales, this is how laverbread came to be known

and eaten to this day. Caiside tasted the cake and found it different but not altogether displeasing. Anodd, when offered a cake, sniffed but still wanted no part of the creation.

Then, the little girl produced a small round stone from the folds of her dress and offered it to Caiside. "Here," she said with happiness, "it is of great use. Find a low spot and put it into the ground along with Anodd's bag as you would sow the spring crop. Let your sheep graze there and you shall not want for water."

"What is it," Caiside asked turning the small, plain looking stone over in her hand. But none of the visitors would say more on the matter, only that she should do as instructed.

Caiside could not thank them enough. The old man and children broke into song, told tales and danced with Caiside in the firelight. All among the branches, the shadows responded in a gay revelry and more than one pair of curious animal eyes peered at the queer spectacle in bewilderment before moving elsewhere. Gradually, Caiside grew weary and fell asleep to the sound of their soft voices.

When morning shook her awoke, the three little people had long since departed. Beside her was a parcel of cheese and milk. Anodd stood waiting though she quickly realized that there was a small sack by her parcel. Inside, she saw fine golden oats. As if concerned Caiside might eat some of the oats, Anodd moved to her side and thrust his muzzle inside to lay claim.

Caiside laughed and let him take his fill. Again, the bag, though small and light weight never seemed to empty but always had enough to feed Anodd until he had taken his fill.

Both now having fully bellies, Caiside continued her journey home where she was received with relief. Their surprise could be imagined when they discovered she had only a meager supply of dried fish. Worse, she had mounds of dried ill-smelling seagrass within the vessels.

"What mischief is this?" cried her mother in disbelief, "It seems that you and Anodd have dined well in your travels for your cheeks are pink and belly full. You were to bring food, not leavings from the ocean that not even the goats and dogs will eat. Was the king so miserly? Did you offend him? Why would you treat your parents thus? Why so heartless? Now we indeed shall starve since we are no better off than pounding tree bark or gnawing old bones to stave off hunger."

Quickly, Caiside related her tale and, using some of the water stored in the house, set about showing how the cakes could be made. Her family was at first skeptical and thought, as had the king, she had taken leave of her senses. But they tasted the finished cake and felt full for the first time in a great while. Though not the most delightful meal they had ever tasted, they were amazed and very thankful. They praised her for her good sense in helping others.

The following day, her mother set to making the paste as instructed. Caiside took Anodd to a deep bowl located between two foothills. Here, she planted the small seed the little girl had given her and buried Anodd's special feed bag with which he was loathe to part. She put a little of their precious water on it and waited until the afternoon but nothing happened. Undeterred,

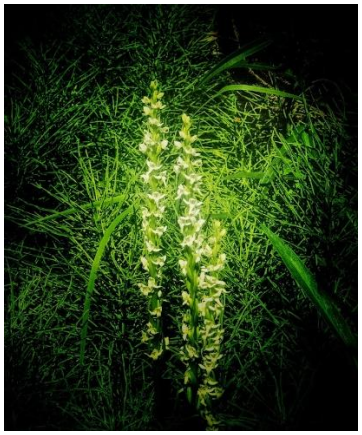
she went home and returned the following day to see a small sprout. This mystery puzzled her mightily for there was no water to be seen on the ground or in the sky.

Day after day the plant grew steadily into a tree with splendid green tender leaves. After a week, she took their modest flock of sheep to water and passed by the plant to check on its progress. The sheep, seeing the plant and its many green leaves ran to start devouring it. Panicking, the tried to shoo them away but they kept eating. Caiside grew alarmed when the plant seemed to bleed a clear liquid and the sheep kept pawing and digging deeper and deeper into the ground. Quite suddenly, water began to bubble and gurgle from where the roots had been. Soon, the sheep were in a puddle of clear, beautiful, marvelous water. Water began to bubble forth and keep bubbling. She cupped her hand and tasted it and found it to be wonderfully clear and pure. Stepping back in amazement, she took her flocks home as quickly as she could and related this wonder to her family.

Wasting no time, they followed her to the depression and were amazed that the water had flowed so much as to now create a pond. They splashed and played to their hearts content before going home and relating the news to the village. No one wasted a moment and all took their flocks to sate the parched tongues.

By weeks end, the small pond had turned into a small but deep clear lake. True to her word, she went back to the king on the coast who had not forgotten the girl and tasted some of the cakes. Astonished, he ordered his cooks to watch and she gladly shared the secret. The king, in gratitude, bade the people under his protection to honor the gift of the fairy folk and show them respect. To Caiside, he gave her a fine white linen shawl and sent her home with salted fish, good oats and mead as a reward for keeping her promise.

It has been said that some fairy folk live in this new lake that issued from deep folds in the earth. As tribute, Caiside took white bread and milk to the lake in order to thank them and they, in turn, came to speak and sing with her. Whether this is true, I do not know. What remains to be true is that the kindness of one young girl brought food and drink in endless amounts for her people and others. For only when the seas no longer produce grass nor the spring of the lake yield its sweet water shall they go without.



Kerwyn's Stench

There was a man who was a skilled furrier and a bachelor from the village of Llanrwst. This furrier was named Kerwyn. Now Kerwyn was an industrious man of about forty and well known to be shrewd in his dealings with others. He traveled to many villages and was so successful in his trade that he had accumulated modest wealth.

Kerwyn, however, seemed to have been born under a particularly unfriendly star. He possessed the distressing attributes of dark mottled skin, a large hairy body, and a mouth that jutted forward like a goat. If such distressing attributes were not cruel enough, he had a curious honking like laugh when excited. His predicament was made worse early on by his own parents. The whispers had begun early about his possibly being a fairy changeling. Since his little sister looked nothing like him, his loving but embarrassed parents began to wonder if this might not be true. The nastiest of rumors was that his mother had been beguiled by an ogre in disguise in order that he not die childless. But despite the gossip of the village, they raised him with as much love as might be expected and watched him grow to be a bear of a man with the strength of two full grown men.

Early on, the children of the neighborhood cruelly dubbed him the hairy goat boy and mimicked the sound of a goat. He grew deeply embittered towards his tormentors as they teased. His pretty younger sister Morgan, however, was devoted to her big brother and he to her. Quite often, it was she who chased off the taunting children despite her smaller size. He had loved with all his heart until she drowned in a nearby pond while playing with friends. After her death, part of him died too and the softness that he possessed seemed to slip away for good. Later, when he grew to such an immense size, no one dared openly taunt him though he had quietly been renamed 'Billy' among the locals to suggest billy-goat.

Now in recent years, the villagers always knew when he was close at hand since a particularly disagreeable odor announced his arrival. Some claimed the stench was but the inevitable effects of his trade as a furrier. Others, however, were certain it was due a curse set upon him by one of the water fairies. Some of the villagers were certain of this since Kerwyn freely boasted that he had insulted one of them on the shores of the nearby lake of Llyn Gwynant.

He claimed that a certain fairy had scolded him for taking too many fish. He, returning the favor, barked that she smelled like a nasty sea hag. In a nearly apoplectic rage, the fairy cursed him with a hag's stench. No matter whom he consulted, the healers and herbalists seemed unable to cure him of this lamentable condition. Whether by curse, effects from his trade or mere bad luck, he was likened to a room filled with crushed henbane. Especially in summer, the smell could be

so bad that the tavern owner grew to dread his coming because his hall would soon be empty of all but the most determined patrons. Predictably, the most sagely advice was to always remain upwind of the man and windows open.

Knowing that his years were getting on and being very lonely, he was desirous to find a wife to keep him company and produce children. There were eligible maidens in the village and though he was successful in his trade, they understandably wanted no part of being wed to him. In all his travels, he found that there were maidens and widows that were available to marry. But more often, those willing to consider him were too ugly, intemperate, or otherwise unsuitable for his tastes.

One family, eager to have a man of worth, raised his hopes with talk of a beautiful daughter. They showed her from a distance, flaxen hair and slim body dancing gracefully in the meadow. Her parents said she was comely, would be a devoted wife and perfect match for a man such as Kerwyn. When they invited him to supper, he applied ablutions and scents to be appealing. He was, however, shocked to find that, while indeed very pretty, the girl was a hopeless simpleton who slobbered her food and constantly laughed at something unseen. Several times, the mother cuffed her in annoyance to some giggle or odd behavior. Several times she seemed to give him a sly look with a grin that he couldn't quite figure out. He briefly considered the arrangement for she was a great pleasure to behold. But in the end, he left in a rage when the distracted girl dumped her hot soup, bowl and all, into his lap causing him to howl in dismay. Then she simply shouted with glee:

"Goat! Goat! Goat! Hairy stinky goat!
Pour the soup hop a loop dandy sandy oaf
Comb his beard thrash him 'til he croaks!
Knock his head cow is dead rocky locky dolt."

Then she swept the table clear of dishes, made a series of pirouettes and dashed out into the twilight singing nonsense, giggling, and flapping her hands in the air.

Her family desperately tried to get him to reconsider by saying that all she needed was a good knock on the head every now and again but he brushed them aside and hastily departed. They were greatly disappointed having hoped at long last to being rid of the silly girl.

Everywhere he went he found no success. Except for his prosperity and great strength, he was without question one of the a most undesirable prospective husbands imaginable. It was joked on more than one occasion that the vicious Old Woman of the Mountain that roamed Llanhyddel would have taken to her heels upon his coming.

Now near the lake of Llyn Gwynant, which is deep in Snowdonia, there was a certain maiden named Gwen. She remained faithfully with her elderly great aunt, Olwen, who had raised her after her parents had died from fever one winter. Local bachelors, especially Kerwyn, paid visits to the little cottage seeking Gwen's hand in marriage. She was known to be a kind, virtuous girl who was not only pure as her name's sake but beautiful as the flowers that flourished by the lake in spring. She made periodic trips to the village of Llanrwst to buy the

goods she needed and sell her weavings which were said to be of excellent skill. The villagers especially sought her for the much-desired puddings that she made.

It's well known that Snowdonia is a domain of the Tylwyth Teg water fairies and the very same type that Kerwyn insulted. Gwen was a favorite of one of the water fairies named Aeval who lived in this lake. Gwen rowed out in her coracle and brought gifts of cheese, fresh milk and white bread which are favorite foods of the fairy folk that she made from the modest garden at their home. The fairies, in their turn, brought music, dancing and helped weave fine garments for Gwen sell at the market place.

It came to pass that Gwen's great aunt paid her last debt to nature and was laid to rest at a ripe age. Gwen and the fairies wept. Aeval spread flowers upon the body of the departed woman and brought comfort to Gwen. Olwen was then brought to the village priest and given rites before being returned to the earth. Gwen was despondent and despite the interest of a number of suitors, she did not wish to be married to any of them. Some months later a terrible plague swept through the valley and carried off many a head of livestock. This was especially hard on Gwen who lost her few sheep and sickened her prized black cow.

Now this scourge was hard on a good many people. More than one family were forced to sell all they owned to put food on the table and even that was often not enough. Olwen had owned the small cottage but with the loss of the means to earn a living, Gwen faced having to sell it. Kerwyn did not relish the losses borne by his neighbors but neither did he stand idle. He purchased some of the remaining stock and household goods at steep discounts which greatly increased his wealth. Though he did provide money in the exchange, his cutthroat haggling did nothing to improve his standing in their eyes.

Kerwyn, and others, had approached Gwen on occasion as suitors for she was a most desirable, skilled, and comely prospect. As the privation took its toll on others, the suitors became fewer in number. Kerwyn, no doubt pleased at the drop off, was certain that it was only a question of time before Gwen would be forced to marry or sell her home. In either case, as he reasoned, he was determined to be the one she would marry. If she sold the cottage to him, she could stay…as his wife.

Kerwyn waited anxiously for several months. Seeing the effects on the village, he decided to pay a visit to Gwen knowing that conditions would have taken a steep toll. When he arrived, he was moved to genuine pity at the sight of her wretched condition though knew it was to his benefit. He noted the poor state of her garden and sparse garden. He espied her standing by the lakeside watching flower petals float about. Though still beautiful, she was beginning to show the effects of starvation. Her clothes now virtually swallowed up small frame.

"Gwen," said Kerwyn, "I've adored you for years from afar. You are too beautiful to be alone and waste away in an empty house and ruined garden. You've lost your livestock and garden like so many others. You ought not suffer needlessly, come be my wife and you shall want for nothing."

“No, Kerwyn, “you are kind like many men to offer me so much, yet I desire to remain here and live as I may.”

“But you are alone, I am alone,” he replied undeterred, “You should find the winters warmer and fuller in the cold months with me at your side. Come and I will treat you well as my wife. You shall be the mother of my sons and daughters. They will bring laughter to our household and you shall weave your fine cloth and make your fine flummery.”

“No Kerwyn,” she replied softly, “I am not alone and I have yet much joy and laughter here. I am part of a family and devoted to them.”

“Aye,” said a soft voice from the lake.

Kerwyn started in surprise and looking over saw a beautiful maiden above the water.

“She is not alone, Kerwyn,” said the fairy, “she is as a sister and daughter to us and is pure of heart and devoted to us. She will have sustenance from us.”

Kerwyn scowled in disgust for, in fact, this was Aeval, the very fairy that had laid the curse of stench upon him.

“You! Vile creature,” he bellowed with fury, “it is because of you that people hold their noses in disgust at my presence. It is because of you that I have no woman to share my bed in winter and have no children. She has no need of your foolish dancing or indolent and deceitful folk; she needs the warmth of my hearth and a good husband.”

Stooping down, he seized a pitcher filled with milk that Gwen had brought for the Aeval and hurled it at the fairy who vanished and reappeared a short distance away. The pitcher splashed into the lake spilling its precious contents and sinking straight away.

“Kerwyn,” wailed Gwen, “That was an evil deed! The milk was precious and the cow no longer produces much. That was a gift.”

Kerwyn at first felt shamed but then wheeled on Gwen, “You are a silly girl. You will need food soon enough and come to me and I will welcome you and give you plenty. You shall leave and these tricksters and their mischief. Do not spend your time idling with their kind. See how they have marked me. They shall be your ruin beautiful Gwen. Mark my words, you will be my wife and bear my children or you shall waste away from an empty belly with naught but the laughter of their mockery. That would be a tragic waste.”

In a rare moment of anger, she shot back, “Begone you vile man. Leave me in peace and find some termagant to match your temper. Those with whom I place my trust and virtue is my own business.”

“That may be true,” said Kerwyn gesturing towards the lake, “but you are a silly child and a fool to turn away my generosity. No good can come with them.”

“Kerwyn,” reproached Aeval coldly, “I see you have not yet learned your lesson. You shall find a bed of rest, but not of your choosing. Your bed is not for evergreen but henbane and nettles to

match your goat face and beast's body. Beware, beasts are attracted to their own, and even animals will revile ugliness of heart."

"Back to the depths with you foul wretch," barked Kerwyn who picked up a large stone and hurled it at the fairy maiden with all he was worth.

Again, the fairy vanished and reappeared, but with a look of darkness and anger upon her fair countenance.

"Three times you have insulted me. Beware of the light of the moon when it is full," she said coldly, "you stink as a goat and wolves greatly desire their flesh."

Kerwyn said nothing but in a blind rage drew out his knife and threw it at the fairy who disappeared yet again but this time did not return. He breathed heavily with a red face and clenched fists. Already he was bemoaning the good skinning knife he had foolishly cast away, though he had some satisfaction in knowing that fairies could not abide anything made of iron. Glancing down at Gwen with rage, he turned to leave. "You will see wisdom," he growled, "there will be no other suitor. You'll soon see you have little choice or starve."

But Gwen seemed not to hear. She was staring vacantly, borne away in though by her increasingly difficult situation.

Mounting his horse, he glanced back gritting his teeth and rode back towards town.

With each passing month, the cow produced less milk and finally died. Gwen was able to sell some of her cloth but Kerwyn had begun spreading the rumor that a mountain hag had cursed the young girl which had resulted in the death of her great aunt and one remaining cow. He pressed home the fact that the fine quality of the cloth was no doubt because Gwen was in league with the hag and could result in sickness for all who purchased it. Few believed the rumor. Most simply ignored his ranting and even took a measure of satisfaction knowing that although he had become wealthy at the sufferings of others, he could not have the one thing he most desired. The villagers began to notice that the stench from Kerwyn, already bad enough, seemed to continually grow worse and folk would go out of their way to avoid coming within nose-shot of him.

For weeks on end, Kerwyn visited Gwen with kindness, gentleness and even pleading with offers of food and renewed pressure for marriage. Always he returned home bitter and frustrated. Finally, in August, a traveling merchant arrived in the village displaying fine woven cloth. He explained that he had met a young maiden in a chance visit to the nearby lake. He was astounded at the quality and had enjoyed the best cheese, butter, and bread he had ever encountered. She also had a magnificent ale, that, despite all pleading, she would not tell how she brewed. She had bought a fair amount grain and other household items with good silver.

The merchant turned pale when Kerwyn approached with his repellant odor strangling the poor man's nose. Kerwyn, dwarfing the merchant, closely questioned the man about this maiden all the while suspecting who she was. If so, his plans would be wrecked by her reversal of fortune. He had sought out and spent a goodly sum on livestock to lure the maiden. He was certain, by

this time, she would be desperately hungry and choose to marry or sell her cottage rather than starve. Even a few of the other villagers had visited and suggested she sell or find a husband to survive.

“She has a brother, father or husband?” Asked Kerwyn anxiously.

“No,” said the merchant, trying desperately not to gag, “I find it rather strange she should be alone,” he continued, “she is a pretty girl and would make a fine wife. I even thought to try and woo her myself but she said she had chosen to remain a maiden. Such a pity and waste. Gwen! Yes, that’s it, Gwen is her name.”

“Oh,” said Kerwyn sighing in relief that there was no new rival. He quickly changed his demeanor to a hint of jealousy, “She is to be married soon enough and I’m the one that shall do it. Should you return, come to me first and I shall buy your wares and deliver them to her.” He stood to his full height and folded his arms to impress the point. Not missing the threat, the merchant muttered a promise and hastily went to the tavern, not the least bit sorry to part company. Satisfied with the details, Kerwyn set out immediately for the cottage perplexed. He took two fine cows with him. “How could she have come into such good fortune?” he wondered greatly vexed.

He reached the cottage and saw her churning butter looking radiant in the sun. He was startled at how healthy she looked.

“Come with me away from this place,” he said placatingly and startling her, “I am not so bad a man as you think. You can be happy again under my roof.” Gwen listened patiently as he continued on, “I’ve bought two black cows that produce rich good milk and sheep that produce so much fine wool that you will be well content. They cost me plenty but they are yours for the asking. The cows are with me but the sheep have yet to be delivered.”

Gwen, sweetly as ever, gently told him no. “Indeed Kerwyn, I have heard of your swelling wealth from the very people whom you paid so cheaply. You are a man of strength and property, no one can deny that. I am happy where I am Kerwyn. My garden is returning and I am content.” Kerwyn, bitter and angry, glanced around and was speechless when he saw her garden that was flourishing better than any other that he had ever laid eyes upon. Then he saw a cow and two sheep of splendid quality.”

Following his gaze, she smiled and spoke softly, “Gifts, from Aeval and her kin. I tend them and they sustain me in all things.”

Kerwyn said nothing but was wroth and took his leave. Passing the sheep, they sniffed the air, bleated loudly and bolted away only adding insult to Kerwyn’s injured pride and wrecked hopes.

Now it is well known that the fairy folk have their own cattle and sheep. To those whom they respect and when they are in the frame of mind, they might give some of those treasured beasts. Such was the case for Gwen who, in all things, was adored by her water fairy benefactors. She was tender and gentle with the animals and they produced the finest milk and wool that one could want. Fairies also have been known to give gold and silver to those who do them good

turns. Gwen, by their care, and from her devotion to them was well provided. She, in turn, also gave of the bounty she made in cloth and food to her neighbors in and in the village. She took whatever little they chose to offer and often would take no payment at all.

Kerwyn sat brooding in his shop uncertain what to do. He did not return to Gwen's cottage but set out to sell his wares in various villages to ponder these matters. He continued to be successful and increase wealth but he felt empty and unable to take pleasure in the gain. It was after one trip, some months later, that he noticed a weeping crowd gathered around a cart. Walking up, the crowd immediately gave wide space. He was shocked to see the flaxen haired Gwen laid out as if asleep. She was beautiful even in death. Looking at a neighbor, he received an explanation.

"Children came running and told us she was dead," began the neighbor, "they said the little folk told them. Several of the women went to investigate and found her. They went to her home and found poor Gwen dead on her bed. They thought she was asleep but someone had covered her with flowers. Seems she was bitten by an adder for she had two marks on her leg.

Kerwyn was devastated. He wandered home unable to think what to do. He would never kiss or embrace her because an adder had beaten him to it. The townsfolk gave her a good burial in the churchyard. Flowers were strewn upon the grave. The townsfolk reported that when they returned to the cottage, the cow and sheep were nowhere to be found. Likewise, the search for the rumored silver and gold had turned up nothing. Naturally, it must be said, the livestock were retrieved by the fairy folk for they will suffer few mortals to borrow their livestock.

Kerwyn, again, put his mind to work but few could stand to even approach his shop due to the ever-increasing stench he bore. Dogs would yelp and run away with one whiff and even birds that alighted on the roof, squawked in alarm and flew off. Some villagers noticed that as he aged, his embittered gaunt and scowling face began to look more goat-like than before.

One day, not so long after Gwen's death, Kerwyn set out on a journey to a distant village. All afternoon, an overcast sky and persistent drizzle made travel slow. The night fast approached and as there was no place to lodge, he pulled his cart to a glade, set up camp, ate, and went to sleep. He woke suddenly sometime in the night and saw the landscape bathed in silver; the moon had waxed full and overcast sky cleared. Something had startled the horse which neighed nervously and tugged anxiously on the tether. He got to his feet and tried to calm the animal and then heard it. In the distance, the howl of a wolf. But this howl was far away. Caressing the horse, he almost had the animal settled when another howl sounded, this time much closer.

The horse once again became agitated and much more difficult to manage. A third, then a fourth howl sounded and he began to feel a sense of rising panic. Quickly, he raced to his cart and retrieved a sharpened sickle. Feeling surrounded, he raced to the horse cursing and after some effort mounted it. He decided that he could retrieve his cart later and with one kick his mount bolted away. The wolves were much closer now and in minutes they converged on his empty campsite. Instantly, they pursued his scent and the horses, which was no doubt a simple task. He rode on for many minutes through grasses and flat stretches in the valley. Glancing over his shoulder periodically, he could see at least five sleek bodies racing like rivulets of quicksilver

through brush and briar. His horse was tiring quickly since his large frame was a great burden but the doughty animal found stamina from the greater fear of the snapping jaws.

The wolves were gaining quickly and their eyes glittered with the anticipation of a pending meal. Kerwyn's horse leapt over a small but narrow gully with ease and he urged the horse on. There was water ahead, but he couldn't tell how far. The wolves easily jumped the ravine and raced after with redoubled speed. Suddenly, the horse came to a terrifying halt and Kerwyn flew over the horse's head and into the air. The horse turned and bolted off in another direction and across the flats with tremendous speed now that it was relieved of its heavy burden. It easily outpaced the wolves who had already begun to grow weary. One by one, they gave up the chase and slunk off into the night in search of easier prey, no doubt greatly disappointed.

Kerwyn, however, had flow through the air over the edge of a steeply cut bank that dropped almost a furlong down into the placid waters of Llyn Gwynant. Flying through the air, his head struck a rock submerged in the water followed by his bearish body crushing his neck. Thus, came to an end Kerwyn's flight and the end of his life.

The following day, the village folk awoke to find Kerwyn's exhausted horse standing next to his shop with trailing reins. Not smelling Kerwyn, they concluded something might be amiss since no owner would let his valuable horse simply wander about. Upon not finding him at home, they set out to follow his trail since they knew of his routes. Eventually they found the abandoned cart with its goods. They saw immediately the wolf tracks and feared the worst. After some time, they discovered his body floating in the lake. Retrieving the slain man took the strength of a horse. All of them remarked how, to their bewilderment, he no longer had an odor. More than one, noting the particular lake, suggested that the fairy folk had released the wretched man from his burden, but others said that the fairies would never have tolerated such a soiling in their home and thus washed it clean.

The sexton presided over his funeral which the whole village attended and he was laid to rest. As children grew to adults and had children and grandchildren, it was remarked with solemnity that Gwen's grave had roses and evergreen always present though no one recalled planting them. Across the cemetery, Kerwyn's grave remained choked with henbane and nettles. No attempt by the sexton or others to remove these noxious weeds ever met with success. The old folk knew why. Gwen had been such a devoted friend to the fair folk and virtuous woman, she was now married to her grave. In truth, this was not a bad thing for virtue was highly regarded and respected. The fairy folk, the flora they placed, and the sun and moon comforted her resting place with gentle light. But likewise, the fairy folk had not forgotten Kerwyn even in death. His wedding bed in death comforted him little and it is said that even his bones were pricked by nettle and rattled by the stench of henbane that kept him warm.

Judas Goat

Now there are many types of fairies. Among them are elves called Ellyllon. They lived far longer and more peaceably in Wales than any of the mortals that resided there. The squabbles and fighting among men were something unknown among the elf peoples. They were bewildered at the impatience and new change mortals always seemed to crave. They, by contrast, were quite content with the life they had always enjoyed and saw no reason to bring sadness or strife for wanting some new change.

The Ellyllon were a jolly people but took exception to slights. They detested dishonesty and falseness and took varying degrees of vengeance upon those that transgressed against rules of decency. While occasionally engaging in affairs of their human neighbors, they generally kept to themselves. Now other kinds of fairies were not friendly or peaceable and were shunned by other fairies. Goblins, hobgoblins, witches, and others, never turned away the chance to try and lure hapless mortals to bad ends or frighten with omens and trickery. Such creatures were a nuisance even to the good elves who suffered wicked tricks and games at the hands of these disreputable types. The mortal people fared worse at the hands of such unpleasant types. Sadly, humans did not care to make any distinction and often assumed all fairy creatures were the same. But sometimes, even friendly and unfriendly fairies can agree to work together for a common purpose.

Once, hundreds of years ago, the ruthless monarch Edward Longshanks descended upon Wales to lay waste and bring subjugation to a freedom loving people. There was one young humble farm boy by the name of Tudir that lived near a treacherous peat bog. Like many of his other village dwellers, he knew the dangers of the place and how to recognize and avoid the dangers. On more than one occasion he had stayed out in the nearby pastures working past sunset and seen the mysterious lamps of the Ellylldan elves appear in the thick, clinging mists that arose nightly over the bog. We know them by another name, will-o-the wisp. Since Ellylldan and Ellyllon are so similar, we will avoid confusion and call the Ellylldan wisp elves. He learned the

hard way that such glowing lights were a danger. As a lad, he observed one of these lamps in the distance. He was misled to thinking it was a traveler unfamiliar with the lay of the land. Wanting to help, he set out to guide them. He would have been swallowed up forever in a silent watery grave had it not been for a neighbor who, having seen his astonishing foolishness, chased after him and warned him of his peril.

Now Tudir befriended one of the kindly Ellyllon maidens named Roslyn. Having told her of his mishap, she started in alarm and explained that such lamps were carried by wisp elves. She scolded him and said he was never to pay heed to such lamps for those were a different group of elves. This other group were the treacherous wisp elves who were angry at mortals from long ago for digging up their trees and destroying their homes. In revenge for these slights, they flooded the area to this bog and forever carry lamps in the mist and dark to confuse and lure mortals to a sorry end.

Having warned him of the dangers, Roslyn and her sisters spent countless hours with Tudir having a grand time telling stories, creating poems and singing new songs. Tudir brought good treats of white bread, fresh sweet milk, and tasty cheese, which in those days were more special and an important part of a family's sustenance. These good foods are among the most favored foods of the Ellyllon and elves in general. After a time, Tudir fell in love with Roslyn and she him. Understandably, he sought to make her is wife. Her fairy father, Caradoc, took the remarkable step of giving his consent to the match with the condition that Tudir leave home and live with them. This was no small matter since Tudir would be forever changed into one of the Ellyllon and not return to his mortal kindred save on rare occasions. To be sure, elves seldom ever agreed to such a marriage and it was unheard of for a human to be changed to a fairy. However, the love between the two was so genuine that Tudir agreed to sacrifice what was needed. Caradoc agreed and then sought for and obtained the consent and blessing of Mab, their queen.

Before anything could come of it, however, the English swept through the countryside sparing no field, grain, sheep, goat or cow. When the Welsh resisted, the English did terrible and foolish things. Not only did they bring misery upon the inhabitants of the land, they hacked down the trees and forests where the Ellyllon lived. They despoiled the land, trampled flowers, soiled clear waters and greatly upset the lives of all living things. Tudir's village and surrounding valley were not spared. The elves, as previously mentioned, love peace, harmony, beauty, and good will. But once aroused to indignation, are liable to take revenge as their bog dwelling neighbors had done. Now, however, they were uncertain what to do. The bog dwelling, wispy elves shook their heads and scolded them that trying to live with humans was doomed to failure and only by frightening them away would there be peace. Thus, all the elves were left to helplessly watch the devastation when the invaders arrived.

In Tudir's village, the English left a garrison of thirty auxiliaries to keep the peace and prevent the rebellious Welsh from obtaining food. Much to the indignation of the villagers, they were forced to house the English in the homes, best beds, and best food. The English, always craving meat, took the best of the livestock for themselves and left only the most miserable and pitiful looking for the locals. Now it is well known that elves are special friends to animals. On rare

occasions, they have brought some of their own special breeds to especially deserving mortal folk. With the arrival of the English, they saw how sore pressed the mothers and babes of the Welsh people were for lack of milk.

Caradoc saw Tudir's anguish over the miserable plight of his kin and their hunger. He entrusted a single magical cow to him so that they should have plenty of milk. For Caradoc knew that Tudir loved and respected his people and would take care of the cow as surely as a newborn child. This cow was no ordinary cow but a magical one that always produced enough milk to feed anyone needing nourishment.

Now it happens that one of the soldiers staying in Tudir's home spied the cow and was amazed at its beauty and health. He immediately ran to his superior in the home and they straight away fetched it to slaughter and roast it over the fire. Tudir and his little sitter tried to stop them and pleaded it was a special cow that produced milk for all the mothers and babes who were very hungry since the English had already consumed much of the other livestock. Laughing, the sergeant of the garrison gave them both a good thrashing. With a humiliating shove with his muddy boot to his little sister's backside he sent her sprawling into the dirt with a shriek and grunt.

"Go you scroungy Welsh imp," the insolent soldier barked, "fetch us some ale and bred or it shall be the worse for you!"

Tudir was seething with anger for nobody likes to be called a scroungy imp, much less shoved to the ground by a muddy boot. He was also greatly upset that the magical cow entrusted to him was to be killed to feed the invaders and its bones thrown to their dogs to gnaw upon. To make sure Tudir did not get into mischief, a soldier was set to watch over him as he chopped wood for the roasting fire. While drinking the family's ale, the soldier amused himself by jeering at Tudir and boxing him on the head.

From the shadows, Roslyn watched in fury at the disgraceful treatment of her betrothed and his young sister and reported back to her people. There was much sadness and outrage among the fairies at the loss of their gift to Tudir for fairies dearly love their herds and eat no meat. As the English slept that night with contented bellies, the fairies spirited away all the other remaining village livestock to safety and fed them well. The animals, it must be said, were greatly pleased at their change of circumstances.

When the English awoke and discovered the remaining livestock had vanished, they immediately accused the locals of hiding them. Some suggested that the villagers were in league with rebels and had turned them over in order to starve the garrison. Angered, the occupying soldiers were cruel to the villagers to force them to give back what they claimed was the king's property. They uttered dire threats, beat not a few of the men and women and heaped indignities upon them. They even threatened to run them in circles while the soldiers took turns hitting with switches until they dropped.

But the villagers had nothing to say for, in truth, they did not know what had transpired. The soldiers, determined to get answers one way or another, sent the local folk out with soldiers and

marched to and fro, far and near, through water and bog in search of the missing livestock. Some of the villagers, especially the old ones, were nearly lost in the bog. They were reduced to a muddy, bedraggled and exhausted people. The soldiers merely laughed and jeered at the sight. Of course, the missing livestock were not to be found. When the soldiers got back to the village, they were bad-tempered, weary, and very hungry. But upon arriving, were astonished to discover that even the leftover smoked meat of the slain cow was now missing. More than a few of the village folk received another good beating. But now the bellies of the soldiers were grumbling because the magical cow was not meant to be eaten and simple disappeared from their bellies leaving them nothing. Even the dogs complained with wails since the tasty bones and marrow had likewise vanished.

Now elves do not take up arms and go to war since such forms of violence are the way of mortals not them. They abhor all things made of iron and a sure way to get rid of most fairies is to threaten them with it. These English soldiers did not know much about Wales or their customs. They knew little to nothing about the fairy folk or they would have immediately realized what was afoot.

Despite the ignorance of the Englishmen, the elves were at wits end on how to repay these injustices since the soldiers would not depart. After stomping about all day and into the evening, Tudir began forming an idea. He talked to Caradoc and suggested that he could lead the English away. Mystified, Caradoc listened closely to the plan, nodded soberly, then gave his consent. Quick as a flash, Caradoc went to visit with the wispy elves and the plan was set.

That evening, the English sergeant and several soldiers were warming their feet by the fireside of Tudir's home. They were grumbling about nothing to eat but oat paste, black bread and ale. They voiced different ideas to make the villagers come clean and show them where the missing livestock was to be found along with the ones who had taken them. They were even forcing his mother to feed them with her family's own meager supply of bread and wash their muddy clothes. Tudir's sister was given the task of cleaning their soiled boots. Suddenly, an Englishman burst through the door causing them all to jump to their feet in alarm. He was a knight in a blue surcoat with a gold winged eagle. The surprised men instantly realized his rank and tried to look somewhat soldierly.

"Who is your officer here," the knight barked.

"He is in another one of these pathetic dwellings my lord," the sergeant blubbered out collecting himself, "but I can fetch him if needs be. He is trying to see who stole the property of the king. These filthy Welsh have spirited away the food in the village, the livestock and we are left with nothing but scraps to eat. Who might you be sir?"

"I am, Henry Fitz Hugh, an officer and messenger of Humphrey de Bohun, 3rd Earl of Hereford. Muster at once. I have seen a gathering of rebels mustering nearby for an attack," he said gravely, "I was on my way to Luke de Tany with a report when I saw many torches gathering. I caught a farm boy. After a few cuffs to the head and a threat to let my archers practice upon him, convinced the whelp to betray the ruffians and their purpose. The lad said they had several cattle and sheep with them. Perhaps these are your missing flocks. I have twenty archers in my

company. Muster at once. We will use you to put them to the sword and they call catch the ones who try to get away. Put these cachgi to good English steel and then there will be some lessons learned for your stubborn hosts. These archers are of no use within the confines of where I have seen these devils. They shall remain outside and will support you but we must not let one of these scoundrels escape and I cannot do it alone. I shall guide you myself."

Tudir's sister shot the Englishman a venomous look at their people being called 'cachgi' for it is a most unkind and impolite term. She then started and blinked. For just a second, the English lord flashed her a faint smile and winked at her. But then it was gone and the man went about tapping his foot and urging the soldiers on. She sat on the floor wondering at this and did not notice when one of the soldiers shoved her aside and snatched his boots.

The English ran about quickly and gathered their men from nearby homes. They saw the knight's archers, twenty in number on foot. They were average looking men who did not speak but had the deadly long English bows that commanded respect and wore no armor and caried no sword. The flustered leader of the small garrison ran up and quickly agreed to help put an end to irksome rebels. Recovering the livestock was a bonus.

Twilight was fast approaching and the knight led the occupying garrison towards the woods beyond which lay a meadow and then a long stretch of flatland in a vale. On the far end of the flat stretch was another line of trees where small points of torchlight could be seen moving about. The garrison commander peered out across the land and smiled with a nod.

"Indeed, sir Henry," the garrison commander said, "I see them. I cannot tell how many there are."

"The boy I questioned says no more than thirty," said Sir Henry looking over the stretch of land. But I think perhaps there are more. But that is of little concern. These are little more than peasant rabble. So far, the only enemies I've seen in these parts are poorly led, have a few farm tools for weapons and flee at the first sight of a bill-hook or sword. The more the merrier I say. No matter. We shall have them and I shall pass along your initiative to Lord Humphrey. He knows how to reward courage and initiative. See now…we have a mist rising over that flat and shall be concealed."

Now to get to the tree line where the torches gathered, there was a great mire. This was the very same peat bog Tudir nearly entered as a lad. It that stretched away, had thick weeds, standing pools, twisted dying trees, and sucking mud. In the fading twilight, all was lay still with an almost sinister anticipation.

The garrison commander looked out at the landscape. It was a long way across to the trees where the lights were clustered. Glancing at his sergeant and men, he immediately shared the looks of disbelief and anxiety at the prospect of crossing this dangerous stretch, let alone at night.

"Begging your pardon Sir Henry," he began, "Might it not be wiser to go around to each side and avoid this murky stretch? Its almost dark. We will have trouble seeing. There's water and likely deep mud and holes to snare a man."

“The sides are what they would expect commander,” Sir Henry said, “they would have sentries on either approach but not from this direction. I’ve already waded out a bit before coming here and had little problem. I’m sending my archers to either side to cut them down if they split left or right. We may not have much left to do.”

“But my lord,” the commander began to protest. Sir Henry waived him off.

“Quickly now,” he motioned his archers left and right to spread out at intervals to be sure they would prevent any escapee from breaking past. With almost eerie silence, the archers darted to the left and right into the spreading mist and dim light.

“Be silent as possible,” he continued, “we have the advantage of surprise and should not needlessly throw that away for your men flopping and clanking about. No doubt sound will carry.” As the garrison moved forward, one soldier looked at the line of archers running to his right. He blinked and rubbed his eyes in surprise. It seemed to him that the line of archers had simply disappeared while entering the mist.

At first, the ground was not so bad as Sir Henry had claimed. But after two furlongs of spongy and muddy ground, it grew softer and then gave way to weeds and puddles and then deeper mud.

Several of the garrison’s men carrying pikes were struggling and thumping against their metal helmets and other parts of their protective clothing.

“Quiet your men you fool,” hissed Sir Henry, “They make noise enough to wake the dead.”

Gritting his teeth in frustration, the garrison commander searched about in the dark for his sergeant.

“Pass the word to walk more carefully,” he hissed.

“But sir,” the sergeant replied panting, “the ground is muddy and we are encumbered. Walking is not so simple.”

“Do you think me a total idiot?” hissed the commander, “I know that and so do you. But Sir Henry is liable to have me flogged if you do not get them quiet. Then I shall do worse to you.”

“But sir,” the sergeant continued undeterred, “this is lunacy. Already the mist is heavy and we can barely see the lights ahead. We have begun to spread out and finding each other is becoming difficult without making noise. I have sunk to my knees twice already and another man to his waist.”

“I know,” said the commander with resignation, “I shall talk again with Sir Henry, but do your best to keep the men quiet and for god’s sake together or we shall be strung out all over the place.”

After perhaps thirty more minutes, the grounds simply became mud under two feet of water. In some places it deeper. One man sank up to his chest in a hole causing a good deal of noise and a muffled cry of alarm. Twisted submerged roots caught a few and one man was thrown face down in the murk. This took two other struggling men to get him up.”

Sir Henry wheeled about in rage, “I told you to keep them silent you knave.”

“Begging pardon my lord,” said the garrison commander nervously but with conviction, “it is dark and now the stars have vanished behind clouds. The men can see nothing and there are deep holes in this sucking unholy mud. They are carrying their weapons over their head and some have so much mud on their sword that the devil himself would be cursing because he could not draw them out. This is madness my lord. If they have not heard us already, they soon will at the noise we are making and simply melt away into the night. Should we not wait for daylight. The locals say to keep out of these bogs because of some evil sort of goblin. For once, I am inclined to agree with them. Victory will do us no good if we are all drowned. They hear what the villagers say about these lands and we have seen some of them.”

“You have seen these goblin creatures?” asked Sir Henry.

“Well, no, not exactly my lord,” the officer answered, “but we’ve seen lights in places that are as the locals describe. Lights that are said to lead men to their doom.”

“You mean like torchlight?” asked Sir Henry.

“Yes sir,” said the garrison commander, “only not exactly torchlight if you get my meaning.”

“No, I don’t,” said Sir Henry, “the only thing I see are torches ahead of us. And torches are carried by men. In this case, rebels. I’ve not encountered Goblins. But should we see one, I expect you to point them out immediately. What else are you suggesting, that I am not seeing torches? Men? Or that I’ve lost my senses?”

“No! No not that my lord,” said the officer quickly and frustrated, “It’s just that this is becoming dangerous for us to even get out let alone get at them.”

“We shall seldom have a chance to corner them and cut them down by surprise,” the knight said as he marched forward, “see there? Are they not very close?”

The garrison commander glanced ahead, started to speak then held his tongue. Narrowing his eyes, he leaned forward. “Aye my lord,” he said softly and with almost a touch of disappointment, “I see them here and there in the distance but some are indeed also very close at hand. They move to and fro as if looking for something. I cannot see their faces in this mist. Still, we cannot rush them in this.”

“Nor can we turn and flee my good man,” the knight said, “Showing your back to an enemy will enable him to attack you when you are most vulnerable. It will be cowardice on our part. A soldier’s duty is dangerous. But they will be terrified as we come out of the mist as wraiths with steel in hand. They can move no faster than we in this muck.”

Sir Henry put his hand on the commander’s shoulder and leaned in, “I’ll wait here. Move quietly to your men one by one and tell them to start closing in. It may be that the rebels are so spread out that they will be easily dispatched one at a time and the rest caught before they know we are upon them. When you have told your men, come back to me and we will continue forward and by the bishop’s beard tell your men to watch their step.”

“It will take some effort to find them all to tell them what we are about,” the commander said.

“Well that shouldn’t be difficult,” Sir Henry said darkly, “Just follow their racket and you’ll get straight to them.”

The commander, now glowering with resentment, eased back and started the difficult task of moving through mud and knee keep water to find his men and spread the word. Twice he sank up to his chest and nearly panicked. But after some length of time, he made his way back to where he thought Sir Henry was.

“My Lord,” whispered the garrison commander, “the men are instructed and slowly move forward.”

The garrison commander paused and frowned.

“That’s odd,” said the commander more to himself than sir Henry, “the torches are really spread out all over the place and some are now far to the left and right and few in front.”

“Sire,” said the commander, “Something is wrong. The lights are now everywhere and not all in front. Yet I have heard nothing of them moving. See there, one is almost circling around us on the left side. How can that be?”

Sir Henry did not seem to be listening but proceeded forward and disappeared into the mist splashing gently.

“Sir,” said the commander suddenly, “I think this is devilry at work. The men claim these are what the locals call corpse candles and jack y lanterns that portend death. This can be no rebel group. We should turn back now and come back tomorrow if they still be here. The men are all worn down and shall be of no account should they be required to fight after this long pursuit in mud and water. I fear they shall not listen to me no matter what I say. We must go back.”

Sir Henry gave a sudden startled cry and a loud thrashing and splashing was heard. “It’s got me!” the commander heard, “dear God and by all the saints the thing has me. It wrapped around my…”

There was a gurgling and thrashing. “Flee!” Sir Henry shouted desperately, “for the love of Christ flee!” Then there was only silence. All the lights that were bobbing paused then started coming towards the commander and his men.

Then all the lights suddenly vanished at once. There was stunned silence. Then hoarse whispers of alarm and dismay arose.

“Sir?” the commander asked, “SIR! Sir Henry!” But Sir Henry was nowhere to be found. “Saint Edmund save us boys,” the commander shouted, “Sir Henry has been taken. We must go back now for this is evil ground to be sure.”

The garrison was now in full panic in pitch black, for it was a cloud filled sky. They cried out and began slogging about in all directions becoming separated in the process. Men cast aside their helmets and pikes in an effort to move more freely. Then a single light appeared far off to

one side. Then another in yet a different direction. Sometimes a mass of lights appeared together only to then vanish after a few minutes. Men plunged wildly in all directions and at any light that appeared. One by one the cries and struggling grew farther apart. Shouts of desperation, "I'm sinking" and "I'm stuck to my neck" rose in the night amid splashing and plunging. Finally, the bog was quiet with the lights still twinkling, resumed bobbing floating across the silent bog. By morning, no trace of the patrol remained and the bog retains its secrets to this day.

There was but a single man who stumbled upon an English camp days later and many miles from the village. He had wild eyes, was filthy and looked more like a starving scavenger than a garrison commander. He was reduced to bare feet, skin scratched raw from thorns and barely clothed in filthy rags of what was once a uniform. The only thing they could get from him was an endless croaking about a cursed vale of in Wales where cattle and his patrol had been swallowed up in a bog by evil spirits. He prattled on about Sir Henry Fitz Hugh who had unexpectedly arrived with twenty archers and led them on their ill-fated expedition.

Sir Henry walked back into the village and into his home with mud up to his thighs. Tudir's family started in alarm but their looks turned to wonder as Tudir's magical image of Sir Henry melted away. Caradoc had enchanted him and others to appear as Sir Henry and his archers. In truth, no one knew what Sir Henry looked like so it had been a simple matter to create a distinguished looking knight and cloak him in fitting attire. The unusual agreement between Ellyllon and wisp elves enabled the English to be lured away and swallowed up.

Amid tears, Tudir bade his parents farewell and instructed them to spread the word that the garrison had marched off in answer to the summons of a knight that had ridden up and ordered them to follow. Beyond that, they should say no more. He explained that in his marriage to the fairy woman, he was required to go live with them. The cattle and sheep of the locals were returned in a marvelous state of improved health and all agreed that a secret place would be found to keep them safe from the next batch of English that would undoubtedly return. Tudir presented his parents with a pouch silver coin the father of his bride had given to provide for his parents. His young sister was known to have a voice equal to that of the nightingale. To her, he gave a wondrous harp that she could sing of how the English had been driven from the countryside by angered fairies. He married his beloved fair lady, was transformed, and went to live among their people in their hidden realms.

The English regulars were mystified. None more so than the real Sir Henry who heard of the matter and was not the least amused. The crazed former commander was examined and sent back to Middlesex where his fate remains unknown. It was decided that certain types of auxiliaries were not reliable and that the garrison had simply deserted in fear after being duped by a clever imposter. Nevertheless, acting on advice from local Welsh allies who understood the culture and dangers, the English armies left it to reliable but more prudent and respectful Welsh magistrates to manage the local villagers.

How Loons Came to Get Their Call

Ages ago in Wales, there was a young fellow and his sister, Gareth and Efa, who often journeyed down the road to the village to sell milk and cheese from the family farm. Now they always shared their produce with some of the elf folk that lived in their home. This particular group of fairies were of the Bwbachod kindred and were house dwelling creatures. Gareth and Efa had befriended them early in life as had their parents. Once, when Gareth was late coming back from the market, he encountered an old woman. By chance, Efa had been unable to go with him to market that day and instead had been needed at home to churn butter and help prepare the eveing meal. The old woman was in front of him and looked like a bag of sticks wrapped in old dusty rags. A wild tangle of hair was protruding in all directions from under a tattered yellow scarf. Shuffling forward with a labored wheezing, she was stooped and hobbled along with a gnarled stick. Naturally, Gareth was concerned for the old woman and spoke up as he approached from behind.

"Come now granny," he said cheerfully, "let me walk with you. The night draws fast and the road is lonely. Where are you going?"

Pausing he old woman slowly turned to face Gareth. The old woman was frightfully ugly. She was, in fact, the most loathsome looking woman Gareth had ever set eyes upon. The old woman grinned and showed what few stumps of yellowed teeth were left to her. She said nothing but raised a twisted and ruined hand that was more a talon of a hawk and gently motioned the lad closer.

"Where are you from old mother?" said Gareth, this time not quite so enthusiastically. She still said nothing but grinned and beckoned putting her hand to her ear. Thinking her hard of hearing he took a careful step forward and raised his voice slighty, "Perhaps you are lost? I can guide you. I've not seen you hear before." She seemed to understand and nodded. Gently, she took a step in his direction and he swallowed hard at the sight of a milky substance running from her

baggy eyes. Something kindled in the old woman's eyes and Gareth became wary. She took another feeble step but was breathing more rapidly through her gurgling wheeze.

She gently began to reach forward as if to offer an old woman's arm for escort. Had he not seen the change in her face, he would have been lost. The old woman's eyes went wide and she coughed a terrible phlegmatic cough before lunging with astonishing speed. He darted to one side and easily evaded the clutch. She let out a howl of rage. He turned upon his heels and fled but was dismayed to see the creature was not crippled and feeble as she first appeared but nimble and quick. She kept right upon his heels no matter how fast he went or what direction he turned. Now Gareth was a fit lad and fleet of foot for he often raced other boys for fun. He knew the local area and lept over creaks and under thickets and around trees desperately trying to avoid the woman's grasps.

You see, Gareth knew the land well night or day and harldy needed light to know what he was about. That was not likely to be so for the old hag. He was confident she would be caught up in some bush, fall into a creek or stumble over a rock allowing him to outrun this fiend. To his consistant amazement, no matter how clever his leaps, jumps and twists, she was easily his match and swift as a hunting hound on the chase. She howled in laughter as she ran after him, "No! You can't get away my swift footed boy. Give it up and end this foolish race."

Finally, he began to tire and her clutches so close that he heard the click of her long fingernails. Always her gurgling wheezing was seemingly right in his ears. Once, he felt a fingertip graze down and slice through the back of his tunic. He shuddered as the hideous claw missed his skin. Even so, it felt like a cold piece of ice as it passed and filled him with terror. Finally, he saw the village tavern and finding one last burst of speed, pushed through the door and went tumbling over a chair into a heap to the surprise of all who were there.

The old woman did not follow him inside but disappered into the darkness in a rage by the loss of her young victim and nothing to show for her effort.

After proping Gareth up and giving him a good cup of ale, the patrons asked him questions. They had never heard of or seen this old woman. By his description, some of them began to suspect it might be one of the mountain hags. This was generally agreed upon and all felt that young Mr. Gareth should be escorted home. The hags were not known to approach any more than one person. Two of them escorted him home since they were neighbors to Gareth. Gareth described his pursuer in greater detail and they listened attentively.

"Sounds like the mountain hag it does," said one of the men, "maybe its the Rhibyn or one of her kin."

"Aye," said the other, "ugly as can be and up to villainy no doubt but I never heard of her trying to go and catch someone, least wise not around here. Never heard of a hag that could keep pace with young man like Mr. Gareth here and he's as swift as any stag on the run."

"True," said the first, "she is bad enough and led old Rhys astray last year. Almost fell of the cliff in heavy mist trying to catch up with her. All she did was cry out the sound "Wwb" in front of him. Then he said she vanished. But then just as quick called to him from behind and to the

side. But she never went near him. Bad sort she is, but never lets you catch her nor does she try to lay hands on you. But that's not what poor Mr. Gareth here says."

"I don't know young Mr. Gareth," the first continued, "You might have done well to ask old Gatti, but she died only a fortnight ago. She knew a thing or two, she did, and might have known about this old hag. Carry a knife. You know how the goblin and elf folk hate the sight of iron. The mountain hag will take to her heels at the sight of that. Leastwise, I reckon maybe this one will too if that's what she is."

"Or that big cur of yours Gareth," said the second, "I don't suppose the dog would take to her neither but he'd know if she was about and up to no good. He barks at anything he don't like and I can't imagine he'd pass up a chance to bark at an ugly thing as this. I should think a few blows from a stout cudgel would learn her a thing or two about chasing folk about in the dark."

When Gareth arrived home, the family thanked the neighbors and invited them in. They, however, had their own homes to return to and weren't keen to linger in the night. Gareth gave a full account to his parents who were shocked and mystified, but agreed that the family dog should go and Gareth take a skinning knife and a cudgel to frighten away the woman should she re-appear.

The old woman did not appear the next night nor the next. But the following week, Gareth and his sister were returning home from the market and the creature appeared again. The was walking as Gareth had first seen her, hobbling weakly down the road. The big hound began growling and all the hackles on his back rose the instant he saw her. There was something about the old woman the dog did not like. She seemed unfazed by the snarls of the big dog and a certain fire flashed in her eyes. Gareth's sister pulled out the iron blade but the old woman simply grinned, laughed with her ghastly wheeze and started towards them.

"Listen now Granny," said Gareth pulling out the cudgel, "I respect my elders but you have chased me once when I've been only kind to you. I know you are no neighbor and I shall be forced to use this stick upon you if you chase me again. I do not wish to do that. My sister has iron, which I know you cannot stand and my dog can tear even a wolf to pieces."

"Young fools!" she laughed mockingy, "I'll pick your bones clean before the moon sets. Save your iron and stick for your own hides for I shall use the stick to make you tender and the knife to skin you."

The woman's gaze fell on the dog, "I've got a place in my stewpot for noisy curs too." The dog, not liking what he saw in her look, yelped once and bolted. The old woman howled with laughter. At the sight of the cowardice of his big dog, Gareth and his sister lost heart took to their heels with the old crone in swift pursuit howling with glee. This time, their encounter with the hag had come closer to home and both knew the road in darkness.

"You'll not get away from me this time boy," she shouted, "you or your pretty little sister. I shall be quite satisfied with the both of you and that dirty hound if he comes around."

But once again, the old woman was not going to have it her way. Gareth and Efa started weaving across each other's path and for once the old woman seemed to have trouble. She was unable to decide which of them to chase as they constantly crossed in front of her. Bursting through their front door, the two tripped over their hound, who had already returned, and tubled onto the floor in a heap. Once again, the old crone missed her prey and slunk off into the darkness in a fury and cursing into the night.

Their parents and younger siblings were beside themselves with fear but they could not all troup together to the village everytime they went to market, nor could they count on neighbors to be handy. Now the two fairies that lived in the eaves of the home heard all that went on and rushed to consult their forest bretheren.

One night, the two woke Gareth. "Gareth, this creature has come from Cheshire," said little elf named Gwynedd, "she is most wicked and there are none like her here. Already several people have gone missing in other places. She pursues them and if she catches them they are frozen stiff while she carries them off to her stewpot and eats them up."

Gareth shuddered at the memory of the icy near miss of her clawed hand.

"Yes," lamented Ystrad, Gwynedd's sister, "we are afraid for we escaped her this very night. She does not spare other fairies from her hunt though we would be poor fare on account of our small size. She is mighty angry tonight having been cheated of a meal yet again."

"What am I to do?" said Gareth, "We must go to the village or we shall not be able to sell our milk, butter and cheese. How shall we trade and get the things we need? We nor anyone shall be safe with this villian about for she fears not the cudgle or iron. Even our hound, who fears nothing, is frightened of her and shamed us by running away from her."

They all sat and thought on the mater for a long time. Having no answers, Gareth and his sister went back to bed.

By good fortune, a lad was passing through the area one afternoon. Gareth was in the field plowing and he came up to him and they began to talk. Gareth shared some of his food and drink and they got along quite well. The young man was about Gareth's age soon they became fast friends.

"I am Obsbern and I come from across the sea in Ireland," he began, "I'm a stranger to these parts and need a place to rest my head tonight. Do you know of a good place."

"I'm Gareth," he said, "and while there is a tavern with good ale, I should be most pleased if you stay in our home tonight for we have excellent food and your journey is long. We should very much like to hear about your Ireland."

Osbern gratefully accepted the hospitality and the two returned to Gareth's home. His family gave him a warm welcome and provided him with a fine meal. Osbern told them all about Ireland and provided many excellent stories. During the meal, he was told about the most recent appearance of a frightful and feeble looking old hag. Gareth related how she had chased him, his sister and even frightened the family dog who feared not even wolves. He told him of how the

hag had laughed at iron and the cudgle and had only been foiled by their weaving back and forth before reaching saftey.

"You were clever indeed!" said Osbern with admiration, "It is no easy task to outrun one of these creatures and even more difficult to outwit them a second time. They are dangerous if you don't know how to handle them and she certainly would have made a fine meal of you both." He laughing merrily, "Well, we shall sort this out straight away, for I know of such creatures and they are indeed a bad creature too have in one's land. She sounds to be a *Fomóir,* though it seems much more ugly than any I have heard about. In my home, the Fomorian race dwelt long ago. She is descended from one of their offspring and is among the children of certain evil barrow wights. They were cursed and made hideous for vanity and pride. How she came to be here is a mystery. They despise and hate all youth and beauty. It is good fortune indeed that we met! My people once dealt with such a creature and we may put an end to her wickedness but I need certain things."

That night, Gareth and Efa told the fairy sisters about Osbern and what he had said. Normally, Gareth and Efa would keep their fairy friends secret. So, they had not told Osbern of Gweynedd and Ystrad, the two faries. But having heard the account Osbern related, they agreed to meet with him. Osbern was most respectful and polite to the fairy sisters for he knew that courtesy and manners were greatly appreciated. In Ireland, he was on excellent terms with the fairy people. He told the fairies what he would need.

"I shall need a large sack that cannot be cut nor damaged, nor destroyed by water and fire.

I shall also need a rope to tie it that cannot be cut nor untied, frayed or burned.

I shall also need pair of special boots that will enable me to run as fast as I need without becoming weary. I must be able to dart this way and that and stay just ahead of whatever shall pursue me or catch whatever I chase."

"Is that all?" laughed the fairy sisters, "that is easy enough give us three days and we shall return." Waiting not a moment longer, they vanished to consult with their forest brethren to begin their work.

When Gweynedd and Ystrad returned on the third day, they beamed as they handed over what he had requested.

"Our woodland folk know of you and were happy to help," said the two excitedly, "for they wish to be rid of this vile creature. Humans will come to fear and loathe all fairies if she is allowed to stay. We shall be blamed for her misdeeds. Besides, we are being chased too."

"Now you shall see how we deal with such a villain in Ireland," cried Osbern. "I alone shall take the road to the village and sell your fine butter and milk. Then we shall see."

The first few evenings he walked on the road the old crone did not show. But eventually, his patience was rewarded. One evening, Osbern saw an age bent woman bent on a stick hobbling away from him down the road. She turned at his approach. She had a wicked grin and even he was startled. She was without doubt the most repulsive looking fiend that he had ever seen.

Now Osbern was a clever youth, he knew right away that the creature before him was the same as Gareth described and dangerous.

“Come granny!” said Osbern cheerfully, “let me walk with you for the roads are dangerous. You should not walk alone at twilight. There is a creature spit up from the household pit that chases young lads and lasses at nightfall. It is most ugly, stinks so that even wolves turn their nose. I should not wish you to come to harm at the hands of such a ugly devil.”

Now nobody wants to be told they have spring from the household pit. That is a place where one pays the usual debt to nature. And to be called a devil in Wales is much worse than it means in other places. The old hag knew at once that she was being dealt insults and flew into a rage.

“Indeed young scoundrel,” she barked, “I hear your tongue! So, you are from Ireland. Nothing but dirty, no good layabouts come, from that Island. Fine manners you have! I see that I shall have to teach you a thing or two about your insolent tongue!” With a shriek of rage, she sprang at Osbern with the agility of a cat and shot forth both clawed talons to seize him. Osbern easily sprang aside and laughed mockingly at her attempt. This only enraged her and she leapt again. So, Osbern turned and started running as fast as he could.

She immediately gave chase with snarls and howls of determination, “I have played this game many times before boy,” she laughed, “and I shall catch you soon enough you Irish scoundrel!”

“Aye, old bones,” he shouted over his shoulder, “So I’ve heard. You cannot catch a lad and his wee sister but can only frighten dogs. No doubt, the dog was right in running from your withered face and graveyard stench.”

She let out a cry of fury at this insult and ran faster.

He darted this way and that, over rocks and beneath thickets, through bogs, over hills and around trees laughing and mocking as he went along.

All night they ran with Osbern always remaining just barely out of her reach. To be sure of her pursuit, he would pretend to get weary or stumble then dart away. She would yell out with triumph then shriek with anger when she realized it was a taunt.

“You are a swift one,” she shouted, “Swifter than the young lad and his sister at any rate and of goodly size. You shall make a fine meal!” But in her shout, Osbern heard the first hint of fatigue. On and on he went and she began to lag and finally fall behind.

“Old crone,” said Osbern suddenly wheeling about unwinded, “we have had our little game. I was your little mouse to catch, but now you shall see that I am the cat.” The woman panting came up short and glowered at him.

“Don’t be a fool,” she laughed, “I’ve been around a long time and dealt handily with all who have crossed my path. Brave words shall not save you from my stewpot. My old teeth need tender meat and you have made me very hungry with all this pointless running about.”

Osbern whipped out his sack. “We see about that,” he laughed. Instantly the old woman perceived the fairy magic at work and turned to flee. “Oh no you don’t,” said Osbern now in hot pursuit, “you shall find I do not use claws such as you but I have tricks of my own.”

Once again, the pursuit began, but this time the crone ran for dear life. She was clever and doged this way and that, over rocks and under brushes, through bogs, over hills and around trees but he always remained just behind. As she began to tire and slow, he slowed as he did not yet wish to end the sport. He laughed as branches slapped her face, thorns raked her skin and roots threw her down with a thud and a grunt. Always he would let her rise and start again so that the crone would suffer more. Shrieking with frustration and desperation, she grew slower and slower and finally tripped over a rock and sprawling on the ground in a heap. Quick as lighting he slipped the sack over her and tied it with the fairy rope.

The hag clawed, poked, raked and pushed against the sack, but it held firm. She uttered curses and threats and struggled mightily against her prison.

“Now we shall see how you like my manners,” he trumpeted and pulled out a cudgle. He set about beating the sack while the old hag thrashed and howled in dismay.

“Come now,” said Osbern, “Let us head back.” He dragged the sack over rocks, through thorns and through bog. He bumped against trees and roughly tossed the sack over his shoulder. When dawn arose, he spoke with Gareth.

“Brother Gareth,” Osbern said, “I have been on the chase all this long night and now need my rest. Do for me this favor. Take this sack and tie it to the yoke of the cow. On no account are you nor anyone to try to open the sack for the fiend that chased you is within. Do this for me while I take my rest and I shall relieve you of this burden at nightfall. I need to see if the sack will remain strong.” Osbern winked at his new friend who instantly understood the message.

Gareth, of course, readilly agreed and had no small amount of merriment and sport plowing the most difficult spots of the field with the sack bumping and bouncing behind the cows feet . All morning, all day and into the evening the sack was bumped and bounced until Osbern returned.

“Aye Gareth!” laughed Osbern, “such plowing I’ve never seen! You plowed your neighbors field as well!”

“True,” laughed Gareth, “When Sion came forth to ask why I plowed his field, I told him and he almost split his sides with laughter. I let him have a go and what fun did he have. There were many a rocky place his wife has been begging him to work. You should have seen the look of surpise on her face when she saw him laughing and plowing. She thought him off his head. Hargan too came thinking we were mad but I also cleared a goodly piece of land for his grain. Such a howl and cry did we all hear! Even Efa took our broom handled and layed on a few good strokes. Our dog barked at it and took nips and bites at the sack. Oh how she begged to be let out and promised to leave and never return.”

“Well done indeed!” said Osbern, “tis not a day this hag is likely to soon forget.”

“What now brother,” said Gareth, “for surely if she be let go, no promise will she honor and she shall seek revenge of a most terrible kind.”

“Fetch me a stout barrel,” said Osbern, “A strong one well seasoned and a cart to carry it. We shall go this night to the river Dee and cast her forth from this land. A mark we shall put upon the barrel that devilry lies within.”

With great haste, Gareth bought the most solid barrel from the innkeeper that could be found. It, having not been scrubbed, stank of stale mead and was a fitting prison for so foul a creature. For good measure, Efa plucked a basket of foul henbane and ground it up and stuffed full. Even the disgraced dog, seeking his own measure of revenge, marked the side of the wood. Gareth, Efa and Osbern packed away the wretch and carted her to the river where they rolled her down the bank and flung her into the current along along with the fairy boots.

“Your special boots too?” asked Gareth. “Aye,” said Osbern, “The boots will speed her on her way out to the seas and away from these shores. They are not for keeping. They are a special magic and must be returned to the earth and water.”

They laughed as she bobbed out of sight, howling and cursing the entire way until she was swept out of sight.

As the barrel passed down the river to the sea of Ireland, the hag wailed and moaned the whole way. Any who saw the barrel were afraid of the marks and wails and would not draw near it. Long she journeyed until she passed into the open sea. Birds along the way, the Great Northern Divers, heard her lamenting and thought it so funny they mimicked it. Even today, one may hear their wails. It is said that she floated far across the sea where the same bird, known there as the Loon, also thought it so funny they too mimicked the cry. From there, she passed out of all knowledge but likely still floats from place to place for all to hear.

Good hospitality

There was once a youth named Dafydd, or Dai as many young men get called, who lived near a lake known as The Pool of the Ox's Eye where an evil creature named Afanc had been destroyed. Afanc being gone, generations of common folk had raised prized Welsh black cattle and flocks of sheep without the predations of that troublesome monster. As it so happened, Dai spend a great deal of time in the fields with the family livestock but also listened to the admonitions of his granny. Now granny had lived a long time and was old by any reckoning and knew a thing or two about the local fairy folk who inhabited the area. For many of the people living here, it was not always easy to tell which of the fairy folk were around. Many regarded granny as the most knowledgeable on such matters and referred to her when questions needed answering.

It happened on a certain fall day that Dai was minding the herd when he spied a small man among the rocks and hillside above the Pool of the Ox's Eye. He watched the little fellow move to and fro seeking something. After watching for a short time, Dai walked the short distance to the little fellow and asked if he might be searching for something.

"Indeed I am!" said the little man. "I can help you," offered Dai, "since four eyes and four feet can search better than two." The little man smiled gratefully and nodded in agreement, "Well said! Indeed they can."

"I have lost my bag of herbs and simply must find them," he said despairingly, "they are needed for a great feast and it fell to me to get them and bring them back to my folk. The herbs are scarce and difficult to find and I've no time left to go seek more."

So, Dai looked long and hard and finally spied a small sack that was sticking out from under a large rock.

"Aha!" shouted Dai triumphantly, "here is your sack my friend under this rock though I do not see how it came to be so far under it."

"Oh, that's simple," laughed the little man bounding effortlessly over the rocks and stones and gleefully retrieving his sack, "my kinsfolk like to play tricks on me and hid it while I was still away searching for more."

Dai regarded the little man with amusement, "You have been working gathering your herbs and searching hard for your lost sack. Surely you have an appetite as I do. I've cheese, bread and milk my sister brought me only shortly ago. Sit and eat with me."

The little man bowed and accepted. The two of them ate with great relish. Dai sliced off generous pieces of savory Tintern cheese and broke off pieces of oat bread and gave to the man

who said his name was Sili-go-dwt. "Where do you live good father?" asked Dai, "I know most people well enough in this area but have not met you before."

"Oh, I live near the woods but often travel about," he responded with a twinkle in his eye. Offering no more explanation than that, Dai shrugged and pulled out his clay pipe. Sili-go-dwt likewise produced his own and before Dai could pull his pouch out, Sili-go-dwt offered the lad some of his tobacco which was much better than his own. After smoking a while, Dai felt drowsy and nodded off. When he awoke, the sun was still in the afternoon sky but the little man had departed.

That evening, Dai related his story to granny who looked thoughtfully at Dai. "He was one of the fairy folk my boy," she said, "you did right in helping him and sharing your meal." She laughed, "their tobacco is indeed good and it's said that its magical. You were given a rare treat with that. They have long memories, they do, and he won't soon forget the courtesies you showed him."

Dai looked for the little man in the following days and weeks but saw him no more. Eventually, he forgot about it, though he would like to have had more of the fine tobacco.

One January while Dai was in the hills, a storm came across the mountains. This was no ordinary storm and the temperature dropped rapidly. He immediately started for home and bring his flock closer to safety. This storm was of snow and sleet. It started gently enough but within minutes the wind, and downpour became a blizzard, the likes of which he'd never seen. Though he knew the way home from years of walking, the sky became darker and he was blinded by what seemed vindictive devilry hurled in his face. His poor sheep and cattle bleated and lowed unhappily at their predicament and Dai was forced to move circles around them to keep them together. This delayed his progress so much that with the anger of the unrelenting storm, he could not be sure where he was. In a short time, snow was to his ankles and then calves. Though Dai was a strong lad and no stranger to harsh weather, he began to worry that he would not reach home and set about trying to find some shelter. After an hour of battling the elements and corralling his charges, he knew he should have been somewhere close to home. But there was nothing to be seen.

He continued until dark and the snow was almost to his knees but trudging forward at least gave the cattle and sheep a path to follow. He was growing exhausted and increasingly desperate. Suddenly, he heard sounds carrying in the wind, or thought he did. There was singing and music. At first, he was unable to tell the direction so plodded on. The sounds of merriment faded so he paused and ran in several directions until he heard it again. The animals followed his new path and as he pushed on, the louder the sounds became.

Gradually, he saw a warm light penetrating the snow. As he moved closer, he saw a cave with light coming out of it. The entrance was wide and he led his deep animals inside to be protected. The music and light came from farther back but he saw there was fodder on the ground in heaps which the hungry cows and sheep had already found and began gobbling with great relish.

Shaking the snow from his body, he staggered forward and after some minutes came to an opening where many scores of radiant gaily dressed people were dancing and singing in merriment. A beautiful maiden with golden hair and radiant smile saw him and ran to him pulling his hands forward. Sili-go-dwt came running over and bowed low.

"Welcome young Dai," he beamed, "to my home. A winter blizzard is no place for a herdsman and his charges! There is dark and wicked magic at work in the storm. You must eat and drink and warm yourself."

Dai danced and ate and drank fine cheese, fruit and breads. There was buttermilk and even the warm pudding called flummery. There is no Welshman who would dare turn down a good flummery. Dai smoked many a pipe with Sili-go-dwt and his people. The warmth of the cave with its bright lights and curiously heated stones drove away the biting teeth of the blizzard.

They insisted that he stay. In this comely place, he quickly lost any sense of time. He ate when hungry, danced and sang for fun and slept on cushions when tired. He shared their table, listened to songs and tales which were performed with great enthusiasm. One young maiden assured him his cattle and sheep were fine and happy as could be and another man showed him how to play a harp. After what seemed days, he told Sili-go-dwt that he must be going ere his family would think him dead. After another great feast, he fell asleep.

When he awoke, he was in the cave with his cattle. They were fat, happy, and quite safe. Outside, the storm had departed with disgust having failed to trap the young man and his flock. The sun was brilliant but the snow was deep. Getting his bearings, he saw he was indeed far from home but began trudging a new path. By nightfall, he returned and an astonished family raced out to embrace him.

"We had given you up for dead!" they shouted. Looking at him with amazement his mother continued, "but you look none the worse for being in that weather for six days. Why, even the animals look fatter." His family ushered him into the house where he related all that happened.

Granny smiled and nodded her head with satisfaction knowing full well what had happened. She was doubly surprised when Dai handed her a bulging pouch of fairy tobacco that he found in his pocket. When his mother checked his satchel, she gasped in surprise as it was full of gold and silver coins. When the weather had become more cordial, Dai returned to the grassy lands and occasionally visited the fair folk while keeping the location of their home a secret.

Fairy Theater

Now it's well known that the elven fairies are partial to music, stories, dancing and fun. They invite only the good and kindly elves, gnomes, dwarves, sprites, dryads, pixies and other polite kindred and shun the rude. The inhospitable goblins and their ilk are never allowed to enjoy in their festivals of music, storytelling and dancing.

What is also distressing is that human folk can be discourteous or inhospitable which are two types of offenses that fairies cannot abide. Mortals that are wise tend to be respectful to their fairy neighbors and go to great lengths to keep the peace.

Now occasionally, the elf fairies will travel among mortals. They provide rewards or punishments depending upon what they discover.

Once, a traveling theater came through Wales to the town of Betws y Coed. The large troupe was well known but had not been to this particular area before and thought to expand its reputation and earnings by coming here.

The bard of the troupe, Goewyn, was dismissive of the very idea of fairy folk. He was dismissive and laughed at the warnings the locals provided on the courtesies needed. He had heard plenty of such superstitious nonsense and refused to give them any credence or respect.

"Little goblins, hobgoblins and fairies are all the same and do not concern me," boasted Goewyn as he finished his third ale and broke off a piece of oat bread. "Such nonsense," he continued, "may be fine for your evenings and little children but they do not interest me. If they can pay, I will certainly welcome them but I've yet to see an elf or gnome with good taste let alone one that pays a farthing!"

"Be careful what you say bard," warned an old farmer shocked at the blatant discourtesy, "they are more than likely not to hear of your boasting and be wrathful at your insults. They do not like rudeness and will repay you with your own coin if you're not more cautious with that tongue."

"Aye," said another old sheep farmer nodding, "Tylwyth Teg are not all the same and to call a kindly Boobach the same as a treacherous mountain goblin is foolish. To say that Queen Mabb of the Ellyllon is the same as a witch would be a terrible insult."

Everyone knows that the skill of a bard is with his speech. The bard can use his speech like a harp producing flowers or his tongue like a rapier to slice. Indeed, his skill to entertain, teach, laud or humiliate is well respected by some and dreaded by others, and woe to the fool that makes an enemy of one.

The following day, the troupe set up its theater and began to entertain. Music, stories and singing were well enjoyed by the town. When the troupe began its play, the bard had made some changes to his play. Many of the performances of the troupe involved morality plays from the church that frowned upon belief in fairy folk and went to no end to steer folk away from such beliefs.

Priests, however, were by and large respectful of the local people and did not always set out to antagonize either parishioners or their mysterious hidden people. But this bard and his troupe were not so decent. No indeed, for they were from Wessex. After the troupe had finished the play and he had told many stories, he unexpectedly sang,

In places of tree and luscious field,
Or grazing on mountainous shield,
The people plagued not by plow or hoe,
but demonic hideous and sneaky foe.
Such creatures so nasty and so vile
Do flit and fancy all the while.
To steal, rob, ruin and eat,
The sly born folk will always sneak,
And grab the darling sleeping child,
To tear from mother's breast so mild,
To make a man a toiling slave,
Then lure a father to early grave.
While crops and flowers are God's bloom,
Fairy harp plays naught but doom,
As golden daughter starves into lean,
The fairy crows will pick her clean.
The song and dance of these rotten folk,
Are but the donkey's broken wind a joke.

Some of the townsfolk laughed but they were precious few. Many shook their heads in shock and disbelief as well can be imagined. The bard had insulted them, their ways and the fairy folk. They were angry. As often is the case, the troupe would stop at points to pass around the hat for money. This night, as it was passed around as the play was nearing conclusion, not one farthing would have been paid had they but known the final song that came after.

The town disbursed to their homes but looked over their shoulder certain that no good would come of this night.

Indeed, the elves are well traveled and more well informed of matters than mortals tend to give them credit. It was no surprise then that a fair number of elves had been at the performance to

listen to the entertainment. Naturally, they were incensed at the slight and raced away seething to spread the word.

The troop moved on and camped by Gwydir Forest wherein lies Ffos Noddun which is a sacred place to the elves and where many meetings of any importance are held. They did not know it, but the troupe could not have picked a worse spot. Now numerous types of fairies showed up; elves, gnomes, dwarves and others gathered to watch. They pulled on their beards, clenched their teeth, stamped in fury upon hearing the recited verse. They found it not only in poor taste, but the sign of a bad bard. After an excited meeting, it was agreed that such an affront could not be left unanswered. Now this is a bad state of affairs for anyone who upsets these otherwise joyful and playful people. For in so angering these gentle happy creatures, one can never predict what revenge they will take or in what particular form. This night they watched unseen in the bushes and trees as the troupe set up its camp.

"What foolish villagers," laughed Goewyn.

"Aye," chuckled another, "but they pay decent coin and give good food and drink."

"'Tis true," said a third flashing the two remaining black teeth in his leathery gums, "there were a couple of lasses worth getting to know."

"That is certainly true Caradoc," Goewyn, "but not by you. The day one of those young maidens takes to you will be the day she wakes up next to you and begs for the hangman."

"The devil take you Goewyn," cursed Caradoc.

"Ah," said Goewyn slyly, "but there's a difference."

"What are you on about," asked Caradoc suspiciously and confused.

"Well," said Goewyn, "If I am to be taken by the devil, I know that I am to be in good hands. For I go to mass and receive absolution. Thus, the devil in all his wickedness must let me go. You, my horse handling friend, are not so lucky. For you see, if these fairy folks are to be believed then you are in worse trouble than me. They will realize that the devil cannot lay claim to me, as he is certainly being more powerful than they, it will be apparent that I have the protection of the saints and God. You, however, being to repellant to the devil and to ugly for the saints, will have no such protection and they will settle their score upon you."

Caradoc stiffened, "How's that you knife tongued bard? Saints, devil or fairies, I'm not the one that did the insultin' to their fairy people. That was from your serpent's tongue. They'll come for you. No. I don't rightly believe those little nasties exist. There is always the chance they do, least wise, my folk always swore by them and more than one person I've heard of has come to bad ends who makes them mad. There's no reason to go insulting what you don't know might be out there."

Goewyn roared with laughter as did half the camp, “Alright my good Caradoc, you are starting to sound like the people of that town. Maybe one of those old hags made of a dead sheep’s hide over rotten sticks would take you in and keep you warm in winter.” The camp erupted into laughter sending a sour and red-faced Caradoc into a sullen silence poking at the fire.

Goewyn suddenly stood and faced the forest. He raised his hands and shouted to the woods:

Oh little flea folk if ye truly be,
Come try to suckle my blood from me,
Try to bite me I won’t hide,
I’ll gladly share my sore backside,
For in honor of your music so great,
I’ll break wind and its equal make!

Most of the camp laughed but not all. Some of the troupe had been brought up with more manners and consideration and, like Caradoc, did not at all think it wise to go courting trouble where none need be found. Some thought that while they were not so sure about elves, gnomes, and such, their ancestors, like Caradoc, had been certain they existed. To doubt was one thing, but to needlessly insult was quite another. Indeed, the mass of watching fairies now were beyond outraged by the insults sung to them at their own forest and sacred place. Even their queen, whose name was Mabb, had not at first believed that her subjects could have been correct about the claims of rudeness. Now, they were thoroughly enraged. The bard had heaped insult to injury with their queen present.

After the camp fell asleep, they were soon aroused by the sound of stampeding ponies. Sluggish in getting up, the men were sent racing, half-dressed trying to bring the ponies back. Of course, the fairies had set them loose by untying them and whispering to the animals to run away. For as you know, fairies can speak with animals and have mutual respect. The ponies were just as outraged as the fairies when told of what had been said and, naturally, they were sympathetic. So, they allowed the fairies to ride them all about in merriment as the men called and chased after. When the ponies were finally returned it was near dawn and the men discovered that all their shoes were hanging from trees. It was dawn by the time the shoes were recovered from the tree tops and everyone was exhausted for these trees were very tall.

Some of the troupe were now convinced that not only did the fairy people exist but that they were indeed angry and behind the mischief. Others, however, including Goewyn, insisted that locals from the town had come by night and caused the trouble. He argued further that what ought to be done is to go back, find out who the rascals were and give them what for. The majority, however, knowing that no good would come of returning, insisted they simply move on to the next town. By the time they reached the next campsite, they were exhausted from lack of sleep.

‘The ale is all gone,” cried one man in dismay. “So is the bread and cheese,” wailed another, “there’s naught left but crumbs and smears.”

“Think the rascals from the town took that?” scowled one of the jugglers who scowled at no one in particular. By now, all of them were dreadfully tired and hungry and to go to sleep on an empty stomach when one’s cheese and bread has been taken makes sleep impossible. The fairies, however, had been kind to the ponies and left their provisions of fodder.

This time, as a precaution, the handlers made sure that the ponies were tied up and left a young lad to stand watch. There was no singing and merriment this night. All went to sleep as best they could with grumbling stomachs. Now fairies can use magic and quickly enough sang the young watchful lad asleep. Again, the ponies were set loose and the fairies rode them for no knot is too complicated for a fairy and the ponies were grateful they had been left their food. The men staggered about chasing the ponies who went farther out than the previous night. By dawn, the ponies were finally brought back and every man had sore feet and scratched legs from thistles and stones. No one spoke as they were too cross, hungry and exhausted to be of much account. This time, the hats of the troupe were in the high tree tops. This only angered the troupe but no one made light of anything. They rode in silence and finally arrived in a town. This raised their spirits for it was a larger town with plenty of food and drink. They took an entire day to rest and felt much better afterwards for the fairies did not come calling that night.

Soon the company was in high spirits again and had put the experience behind them. When they set up their stage, numerous people came. Much to their delight, there was a large crow since word of their coming had spread. The music, theater and stories were told without incident and the bard did not make fun of the fairies. He told a magnificent tale and came to the climax only to stop and have members of the company pass around the hat for coin. This was not uncommon for its well known that story tellers will build the audience up and then stop at the most important part. Anyone who likes a story will want to hear the end of it and the bards know this. They know people will pay for entertainment but it’s harder to get them to give money after the performance. Instead, they pass the hat at most inconvenient times and the people quickly pay to hurry things along.

Fairies know this too and cannot abide such interruptions. Unknown to the bard and his troop, many of the people present were fairies but appeared as visiting townsfolk for they can disguise themselves very well. When the performance was at an end, the crowd clapped with great enthusiasm and walked away.

“Tomorrow we shall perform again,” trumpeted Goewyn, “for this town has more people that could not fit in for today’s performance and others will come by recommendation.”

“Aye to that!” said the others, “our hats were brimming full of coin, lots of them with a goodly amount of gold and silver.”

The bard poured the earnings on the table and it was an astonishing sum.

“This makes the previous days bearable,” said Goewyn, “the devil take the fairy folk for they are not in this town.”

That night the ponies did not get loose or run away. Nor did their shoes and hats end up in treetops or rooftops. Caradoc arranged for an innkeeper to bring food to the camp to celebrate and gave a handsome sum to a local innkeeper. The innkeeper brough ale, bread, cheese, and pork and laid them on a table where the troupe immediately set to eating.

Not long after the troupe had finished eating the food, the innkeeper came back purple with rage.

“What’s this business,” he shouted at Goewyn, “I gave you good food and drink and you have swindled me you rascal.”

Goewyn and the troupe stared in genuine bewilderment.

“What foolishness are you talking about fatty,” he responded for the innkeeper was indeed a wheezing, portly man with bulging red cheeks, “I paid you in good silver.”

“Devil take me if you did,” said the innkeeper whose bad temper was increasing with the insult.

His own temper rising, Goewyn leapt up from his seat and stormed to the wagon to retrieve his coin box. “You think you’ve been cheated?” began Goewyn angrily, “how much? In your honor, I shall sing a tale of the fat sow of an innkeeper who thought he’d been cheated. You shall be the sow and my words the hog that ruts your dishonesty.”

“All of it,” barked the innkeeper who was incensed at his being made a female pig, “you gave me silver coin in a sack and somehow switched it out when I wasn’t looking.” He turned the sack over with a jerk of his hand and dumped the contents on the ground in a heap. Opening his eyes in astonishment at what fell out, he quickly flipped open his coin box. Instead of the coin that had initially been collected, the box, like the pile on the ground, was full of nothing but worthless cockle shells that the fairies had put in the collection hats.

Choice and Reward

Choices. They are a constant and daily fact of existence for all thinking people. Are the choices made for motives of self-interest? Principles? Whim? Reason? Superstition? Or are they simply blind and unthinking instinct? Choices made set in motion an irrevocable chain of events that amplify and echo down the corridors of history. Sometimes they are seemingly benign and isolated but the choice made today easily could escape our poor powers of foresight and meaning.

There was a certain well-traveled man named Leifur. While on a tour in Guatemala's Tikal ruins, he came to discover a most peculiar place. The tour allowed for four hours of exploration before they were to return for a lunch and onward to another location. Whether in nature or manmade objects, he always made a practice of looking for subtle detail that invited greater examination. Often, he was successful in his searching and discovered the myriads of patterns and secret places he sought. In this location, recent remote sensing LiDAR technology revealed extensive and heretofore unknown ruins under the forests. The opportunities for discovery were numerous.

Before long, he realized that he had strayed down a trail that appeared more of a well-trod animal path than one made by people. He was quite some distance from the ruins in an overgrown area. He was just about to turn about and go back, when he saw a smaller path that broke left and descended into a densely overgrown ravine. He spotted an irregularity on the ground and scuffed with his boot. He grinned excitedly. Moving the debris to the side, he realized that there were flat stones forming steps. This was precisely the sort of hidden object he sought and, predictably, one that he couldn't resist exploring.

As the path descended in a steep switchback pattern, much of it was completely covered by generations of vegetation and detritus. The rainforest environment was constantly damp and demanded careful observation for each step. The pathway continued downward and after some thirty minutes he reached a long stretch of wider level path curving around the slope. He stopped in his tracks, startled. In front of him was a most curious sight. There was an old man sitting in a folding chair along the path. He rubbed his full Van Dyke beard and was perplexed. The man wore a colorful but faded and sweat stained colored shirt and fanned himself with a straw hat. Leifur paused uncertainly and for a moment wondered if he had trespassed on someone's private land. The old man smiled and nodded in greeting. Leifur wondered how had he not seen this man on his descent? His appearance was totally incongruous with his surroundings and stood out easily in the green brush. Deciding to take a chance, he smiled back, waved and approached the fellow.

The man looked like he had been left out in the sun and rain and forgotten for years. He was so deeply brown and aged looking that Leifur couldn't decide if he was sagely or simply a wizened grandfather out to reflect in peace and quiet. Nobody else was around save an ancient looking hound that looked up at him and wagged its tail softly.

Slowly the old man got up and extended his hand which he took and shook. The grip was stronger than Leifur would have suspected. Leifur took out two bottled waters and offered one which the other happily accepted. The old man offered his chair but Leifur waved him off and sat on the ground.

It was then that Leifur noticed something about the vine covered embankment next to him. The vines were quite thick, very thick. In fact, it appeared as a thick curtain all along the path. Looking down, he saw several stones break off from the path and disappear under the curtain of foliage. Reaching over, he parted the vegetation and peered into the shadows. His eyes widened. There was an opening into the embankment that was man made. Anyone not stopping and looking carefully would never have seen it. He noticed stonework and carving which seemed to outline a doorway. His heart began to race with excitement and he rose to his feet to look more carefully. The passage wasn't particularly tall, but that wasn't surprising considering the height of earlier peoples. He cocked his head thoughtfully, and looked meaningfully at the old man who saw his interest. The old man turned and with a walking stick pulled back a vine. There was indeed a doorway and the markings, which seemed reminiscent of glyphs, were worn and ancient looking.

The old man shook his head slowly. "Hatch k'as," said the old man, "xtaabay". Leifur was confused and shook his head to indicate he did not understand. The language did not sound Spanish. He knew Mayans lived there but no idea how to even begin to decipher that tongue. Quickly, he pulled out his phone and opened a translator that he always had ready. Knowing that Mayan was still spoken, he was now glad that he downloaded the Mayan language. Hopefully, it would be able to tell him the old man's words. With gestures to the phone, the old man seemed to understand and repeated his words. Eagerly, Leifur looked at the phone and scratched his head at the results. He looked quizzically at the old man who was once again smiling. He pointed to the door and repeated the same words "Hatch k'as, xtaabay."

The translator showed the words "danger, demons." Leifur scratched his head and frowned. Was this some sort of folktale about the ancients? Some game to frighten nosey tourists? Perhaps, he thought with sudden apprehension, some illegal activity that he had unwittingly stumbled upon. Wanting to be sure, he tried asking questions. Leifur spoke into the translator and turned it back the old man who seemed delighted at hearing his language. The old man began to speak, but Leifur raised a hand to get him to pause long enough to re-adjust the setting.

"I like your device," the old man said grinning in obvious pleasure, "It is dangerous inside. Only demons live there. Enter and embrace your fate. Go in and perhaps emerge wise. But most find a death. It is better that you return to your people and leave our mysteries to our people."

Leifur frowned in dissatisfaction. "Are you saying," he asked the old man, "I am forbidden to enter, so see and to face what is within? If it is forbidden than I will respect your traditions."

Upon hearing this, it was the old man's turn to frown because the question put him in a bind. Pausing the old man replied, "I did not say so, that you were forbidden. I only said that it is most unwise. Anyone may enter but I tell them the truth of things. If you do, take nothing but what you bring and return with nothing but what you brought. I do not know what you will see. You

are not from here and it may be that you may see things differently. The power of the demon is greater than most accept and you will see that many have failed within these walls."

"What is this place," said Leifur completely drawn in amused by the colorful and dramatic description. The old man smiled once again, "it is a doorway to test the character of a man. It was made long long ago by a vanished people. It is indeed curious and remarkable that you should have found it." Beyond this, the man said no more but simply waited for Leifur's reaction.

Leifur paused and looked at the sky and trees about him then at the doorway. Leifur bit his lower lip thinking while staring at the concealed opening. Finally nodding he was resolved, "I will go in."

The old man looked at him and shook his head sadly, then retrieved a small bottle from a pouch on the other side of his chair. He handed it to Leifur. It was a small non-descript medicine bottle. Leifur removed the stopper and sniffed. There was the faint odor of Lycaste, a flower he recently encountered at a Guatemalan botanical garden. He wondered if it were some type of hallucinogenic drug and a way for foolish tourists to be robbed and made to disappear. He looked at it for a moment and turned the bottle about considering the wisdom of consuming it.

He smiled, chuckled and spoke aloud to himself. 'A foreign land, a single wrinkled man in a chair with an old dog in the middle of a remote and dense rainforest. A dark, concealed and probably unknown tunnel and he offers you a bottle of strange liquid to drink when no one has the faintest idea where you are. 'Only demons and death within' he says. Sheer stupidity and madness.'

The old man looked at him as if waiting to hear the translation, but Leifur smiled and shook his head. "Nothing," he said into the translator, "Just thinking aloud." The old man smiled back and nodded as if understanding and approving that he was thinking about the whole situation.

Leifur looked at the old face and into the man's eyes. An unexplainable inner feeling assured him that there was neither ill will nor duplicity. He looked down at the dog. "What do you think old friend," he said to the dog. The dog looked at him and simply wagged his tail. But even the dog had a strange look. There was something about the hound's eyes that were deep and filled with understanding. He drank the substance. There was only a small amount inside and it had a sweet taste. The old man gestured to Leifur's phone.

"Sugar to make it drinkable," the old man chuckled, "It will help you with the air inside. The air is stale and heavy but breathable. But it will also aid you in seeing into yourself and clear away the distractions of the mind. Remember, this place will tell you much about yourself. Many have failed. Many. And the consequences are severe. Remember, take nothing save what you bring and return with understanding...if you return. It is not as easy as you might believe. I fear that I shall not see you again, but you may. Bet pure at heart as you proceed." The old man gestured to the door, helped him pull back the vines and handed him a small penlight. The old man then sat down, drank from the water bottle, and picked up an old book while scratching the old dog's head.

The opening required Leifur to stoop low. For several minutes he had to move forward at an uncomfortable squat from the buildup of dirt and moss. This eventually gave way to a stone floor. He could now walk even if having to bend his head slightly. The tunnel was disconcerting. Unlike the more carefully designed pyramids, these were rougher and gave the impression of a mining tunnel rather than something of significance. This went on for some fifty feet then opened into a much larger room.

Unlike the unimproved claustrophobic tunnel, this room allowed him to stand. It was a rectangular room but the roof sloped to a point in the center some ten feet above. The floors and walls were carefully cut, placed and in an astonishing state of preservation. To Leifur, it seemed that they could have been placed the day before his arrival. There were vibrant mural paintings on the walls which seemed in keeping with the style of those he had seen in other ruins. Straight across from where he entered, another passage opened. As he glanced around, he observed the puzzling appearance of multiple stone frames on the right and left. They looked to be doors, yet they were false or perhaps appeared false. It suddenly occurred to Leifur that they might be tombs. If so, they were still undisturbed. For his part, Leifur told himself that they would stay that way. Proceeding to the center of this room, he knelt to see a plain clay pitcher filled with what seemed to be water and an empty bowl on the floor. Next to this was a depression carved smoothly out of stone which was fed by a spring and stayed at a constant level by running off beneath the wall.

"Be pure at heart," the old man had said. Guessing the likely and usual historical significance of such items, he dipped the pitcher in the water, poured it over his hands and washed them in symbolic gesture. He had read something about Mayan religion on the trip and took the added step of drinking a bit and spitting to the side. Every culture he had ever seen with places of significance usually had some purification ritual, that certainly seemed the case here. Unlike the temples he had seen in Asia, he knew of no custom of removing shoes, so he did not remove his boots.

When he entered the next room, he discovered it was of interminable dimensions and stone placed walls receded into darkness. There was a strange diffuse light that allowed him to see all that was close to him. This seemed impossible. This chamber was deep underground and should be black as night. Yet, he could not determine from where the dim light came. The air was intoxicating and slightly hazy. It should have smelled like stone and earth but instead, there was a soothing incense. The source of the incense, like the light, he could not determine. In the distance was a table, or alter of some kind carved and shaped from a solid block of jet black stone. There were stone slab tables forming the sides of a path to the alter. Here and there, large chiseled stone blocks contained intricate glyphs.

The tables were arrayed with an amazing assortment of relics covered in thick dust. There were large and small figurines ranging from carved stone sculpture of death and rebirth to everyday stoneware richly adorned with painting or chisel work. Figurines of all kinds were present, some stone or crystal, some bone, some that appeared to be gold and silver and even jade. It was breathtaking. The old man had said not to take, but said nothing about touching or examining. Naturally, he couldn't resist the first test. He looked at the bottoms for the ubiquitous 'made in

China' as he had often seen in places. He looked for mint marks, seam lines and found nothing. None of the items felt like polymers or the other garden variety of synthetics. He was no expert but these seemed to be the genuine article.

Other tables had fabrics with intricate weavings, parchment with paintings and more figurines including erotic art. There were also items with forms, motifs, or styles that he had never seen before in any of his extensive readings of art history and material culture. They were fascinating, mystifying and of extraordinary precision and complexity. Some of the items were disturbing and depicted not simple humans or animals but creatures that one might expect from the bestiaries of fantasy. The eyes of some of them sent chills down his spine. They were disquieting not because they were strange or complex but rather because they almost seemed alive, watching and probing. The feeling was of a multitude of expectant and penetrating stares.

He began to sense that every item seemed to reach out to him and beg to be held. They bridged time and space and whispered of secrets to be discovered. Suddenly he remembered the drink. Perhaps this was a hallucinogen after all. Some drug that made you see things and awaken all the senses and create your own fantasy. If it was, it was good, very good. But then, as he considered it, he did not think that was true.

Leifur picked up and examined many items and marveled at their originality and level of craftsmanship. On one table, he found a particularly striking piece of what seemed to be black jade. It was astounding. When he looked at it closely with the pen light, he discovered that it was covered with tiny runes. It was if someone had painstakingly put hundreds of symbols over a lifetime with a tiny needle on this piece of jade about the size of his phone but double the thickness. But this was something altogether different. There were many small tunnel-like inclusions that went through but were not smooth, but covered with more runes and designs. This was impossible for any person to accomplish. Even lost wax casting could not have achieved the detail on the insides of these small tunnels. He took the stone with him to look at as he moved down the row, careful to remind himself to put it back. It felt warm in his hand, as if it belonged there and spoke to him that he was meant to have it and explore its mysteries.

As he approached the altar, he was the thrall of a sweet incense that made him dreamy. The black stone at the end of the row of tables was set upon a dais. There were various treasures placed there. But in the center was a bone box covered with glyphs and carved figures.

The room felt alive, strangely alive with many eyes upon him and seemingly waiting in anticipation. Returning his attention to the bone box, he opened it and withdrew a smaller wood box the size of a fist sized jewel casket. It was plain black wood and unadorned. He opened it up and saw a polished clear stone sphere the size of a cherry tomato. The most profound characteristic, however, was that it began to pour forth a spectacular light on its own. As he gazed into it, he was instantly drawn in and overwhelmed with images. He began to see patterns he never had dreamed possible, understanding that began to surface and offered insights he had never thought possible. He gazed long and hard at it and his eyes drank in the pulsing light.

The stone snared his mind and he realized that it was addicting. He smiled and laughed as the images and sensations teased and danced in his mind. How was this possible? What did it

matter? The fact was, it was happening. His whole face was bathed in light and the stone seemed to eagerly feed him or was it feeding on him. He felt, or rather sensed, that all the items he passed on the tables were watching him and waiting to see what would happen. He felt a strangeness and companionship and realized the figurines seemed to be drawing from the light as well. There was an overwhelming sense of need and hunger from those observant eyes that seemed to suggest they had waited an eternity to gaze upon this shining light again.

His eyes grew dry and irritated from staring. When he finally blinked his gaze momentarily fell on to the shadows behind the altar and he saw something on the floor just out of the light. He wanted to continue to gaze at the stone, to learn and to possess and returned his eyes to the intoxicating well of delight that was inviting him to tumble inside. But he glanced at the space beyond the dais again and gradually realized there were stones that were irregular and full of holes. Rubble probably, but there was something familiar about them. Using the light of the stone to illuminate the darkness he uncovered the secret. They were not irregular rubble and rocks at all. They were piles upon piles of skulls with empty sockets and leering grins of lives that had poured out of them over the countless ages.

A terrible longing was within him. He gazed back on the stone longer and the intoxication and desire poured back in filling him with a joy. Slowly and with an almost visceral pain, he shut the casket and with shaking hands put it back within the bone box. He felt an ache, longing, and anguish as if he had smitten his own hand with a steel hammer. There was a sound. It was not sound he perceived with his ears, at least not in the usual sense. When he closed the small casket, he felt all those eyes that had been watching him seemed to wail in anguish as if their very sustenance had been dangled in front of them and torn away. Walking back, he passed each table with heavy reluctant steps. Almost as an afterthought, he put the black jade piece back upon its table. The entire time he made his way out of the chamber, the red stone sphere in the box kept calling him back. It called with almost irresistible force as if he was leaving an irreplaceable part of himself behind or committing an unforgivable crime in abandoning it. Quietly, he moved back through the tunnel and out of the doorway sweating the entire time.

The old man turned in genuine surprise and was dumbstruck. He smiled broadly, leapt up and embraced Leifur as a father welcomes home his long-lost son. Even the dog struggled to its feet in the excitement. The old man, with moist eyes, hastily motioned for him to use his phone again to translate.

“You have survived,” began the old man excitedly, “it has been ages and only a very few have come out. You do not know the power you were against, but you have had a taste, though only a tiny taste.”

“What was it that I saw,” said Leifur between with at dry mouth and wiping his brow. The old man hastily reached down and provided a bottle of water and motioned him to drink. As he gulped the water down, there was a strange taste that was not unpleasant but calmed him down. The old man laughed as he saw the shaken Leifur drinking greedily from the bottle. “It will settle your nerves for they have been tested like you are unlikely to be tested ever again,” the old man began, “I cannot say exactly what is there for I do not know myself. I know only that it is an ancient power that was here before any man set the first stone building in this country.

Brought long before the first village set up. It was brought by others. Who exactly, I don't know. But they directed this place be built to test the character of men. Why? I do not know that either, perhaps to see if they were worthy to serve them. Who knows. But the reward was insight and punishment death. For centuries beyond recall we have been told to attend the entrance and allow all those who wish to enter the right to do so. But those seeking entrance are to be given the sternest of warnings. As you doubtless observed, many never passed out again. Now, few recall this place and its tradition or purpose but there will always be someone to watch the door. The fact that you found it is astonishing but then something drew you to this place. That is why you having come here is so extraordinary. Ah, I see the color is returning to your face and you have stopped shaking."

Leifur indeed felt better almost right away after drinking the liquid. "What do I do now," said Leifur. The old man laughed, "Nothing or everything. You have simply tested yourself against a power beyond your understanding and survived despite the danger. You may dream, you may create, you may smile, or laugh or weep. Your life is your own as it was before. But I see from the look deep within your eyes that you have been shown things. If so, that is for you to decide how to act. That is how it is for all who enter and return. They are changed but it may take a long time to understand exactly how."

Leifur unconsciously rubbed his chest. "Look upon your breast," said the old man.

Leifur lifted his shirt and saw a small glyph upon his chest, a tattoo of some sort.

"Ah," said the old man, "your mark given to you. It is not always the same from what I have been told. Yours is not one that I've seen before but there are two small markings within it that I do recognize. This one," the man touched a small mark, "means 'worthy' and this one," he knitted his brow, "I think means from another tribe. So, one who is worthy from another tribe or worthy foreigner." The old man smiled and shrugged his shoulders, "That sounds correct but the symbols are ancient. You know in your heart what it means."

The old man raised his shirt and revealed one of his own just visible in the brown aged skin. "This," said the old man, "is mine. It says 'faithful.' That is why I am here. You may find your days pass with less worry or concern. To have faced your character in such a way reveals a great deal and clarifies who you are. What you experience in life is put in perspective. It is a beginning in a way. You have not found your death but rather something else. But that is for you to discover."

The old man cocked his head thoughtfully, "That's how it has been for me."

"I have to be getting back or they will scold me for wandering off," Leifur said.

The old man chuckled, "Let them test themselves and see if they criticize."

"I shall keep this place a secret," said Leifur, "I think there were tombs inside and they should remain undisturbed along with everything else that is there." The old man and offered farewell with a warm handshake, "That is for you to decide. Anyone is welcomed. "Ah, I almost forgot,"

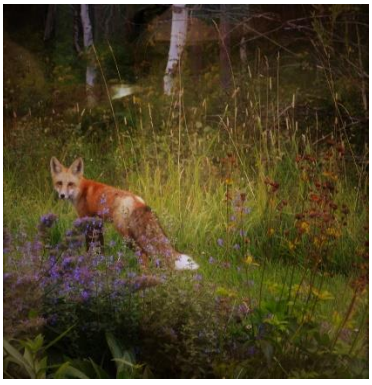
he said scolding himself and reached into his pocket, “I think you liked this.” The old man placed the black stone he had picked up with so many carvings. “You have earned the right to have it until your death. Do not worry, it will find its way back. I have no idea what it means or says but it is remarkable is it not?”

Leifur was speechless. “Thank you, I shall take great care of it,” Leifur finally replied astonished at how the man could have known or obtained the object without his knowing. Though in truth, after what he had been through, he should not be surprised. Even the old dog got up on wobbly legs and wagged his tail with a look in his eyes that said ‘well done.’ The old man looked down pleased, “Nawal is happy for you. He does not fit his name so much now but he is a good companion.

“I’m Leifur. What is your name,” asked Leifur rather ashamed he had not asked it earlier. “Pacal” said the man smiling.

Leifur turned to leave and as he walked thoughtfully to the top of the rise examining the precious gift, he turned to wave a final goodbye, but the man and dog had vanished.

The Fairy in the New World Teaches a Thief



Simon Veridian carried a knife everywhere he went. This, in and of itself, was nothing peculiar. It was simply a tool for convenience. It had no special steel, or components or design. It wasn’t made by a bladesmith or master craftsman. It was not a huge sheath knife or even worn on the belt. As far as knives go, it wasn’t even that attractive and quite cheap. It was, however, a slight variation on most knives in that it was hooked like a talon or hawk’s beak and thus called a bird’s beak and Simon rather fancied it because it flipped out neatly and he liked the contour.

Now Simon, as it happened, was ordinary and did routine daily tasks which required no special need for the knife other than opening the occasional box. He was diligent in pursuit of his duties and obligations but also rather scatterbrained most of the time. He lapsed into daydreams every chance he got and sometimes overlooked the simplest things.

Now on a certain day, Simon walked through a park in New York where he enjoyed getting a meal from a street vendor. The vendor was a gregarious Lebanese man and had many good things to eat especially his savory Kafta. As he approached, he observed a black man, a homeless man, who wore threadbare and stained clothes. This vagrant was a sight to behold. He had protruding eyes from a likely thyroid disorder that drained constantly. His eyes had the disconcerting similarity to that of a frog. He was crowned with dusty, thick, bristly hair and had only a few yellow teeth from periodontal disease which flashed in a mischievous but friendly grin. In all fairness, he was rather frightening to look at but always cheerful and respectful to whomever he spoke.

He was a vagrant that Simon had seen on occasion sitting on a bench nearby the vendor. He occasionally asked for money from those who passed by if they made eye contact. It was difficult to deal with panhandlers because there were so many and one could go broke if he helped every single one. Still, Simon liked to do his part on occasion and gave money or bought a meal. "Hello, how are you?" asked Simon with a courteous smile and nod and passed on.

"Hungry," the man replied as Simon continued and got in line at the Lebanese vendor's stand. As Simon waited, he glanced back at the man who continued to try and solicit change from people, rather unsuccessfully it seemed. When Simon's turn came, he ordered two of the vendor's meals. He felt it was right to give a meal no less desirable than he enjoyed. Upon paying for them, Simon walked over to the man and extended the meal. "Thought you might like a hot meal," he said.

"I didn't think you heard me," said the vagrant surprised but delighted.

"What is your name," asked Simon for he always made a point of humanizing a recipient by knowing their name, "I'm Simon."

"Ronnie," the man said smiling and feeling the warmth of the food.

"Well, you said you were hungry so I figured I'd get you something," Simon replied, "Nice to meet you Ronnie, take care of yourself."

"Thank you, you too!" replied Ronnie who was already savoring the aroma of steaming meat and mixed spices.

Simon touched his forehead as if he were tipping a hat and proceeded to move across the park. Ronnie watched him go as he took the first bite of the steaming food. Twenty feet away, Simon absently fumbled with his pocket and pulled out a napkin to wipe his mouth. As he did so, something tumbled out of his pocket down onto the soft spongy grass. It was his knife. It made no sound on the grass and Simon walked on oblivious to the loss.

Now as it turned out, Ronnie was not all he seemed. He had no need of a knife. He had no real need for clothes or even money. He was a spirit creature, one of the fairy folk that had inhabited the earth long before humans. He had no need for food or drink as humans did due to his spirit nature. He did, however, permit himself to occasionally indulge in food, drink, and other little pleasures to not only enjoy but to experiment and learn.

Now there were, contrary to human understandings, many spirit creatures in the world. Many creatures of different kinds living and thriving in the forests, seas, mountains and among mortals. Many of these creatures wanted nothing to do with humans and resented not only their presence but the long list of indignities and encroachments by human thoughtlessness and indifference. Other creatures of fairy tolerated humans while still others seemed to enjoy moving among them. Ronnie, whose true name was Aniborous, among numerous names he used, was one of the latter. He could take on many forms and delighted in teasing, baiting, goading, rewarding, and punishing humans and animals. In truth, he was more often kinder to animals than people and could befriend them easier. As it turns out, the creatures of fairy treated each other in much the same way as they did animals and humans. Sometimes, the fairy creatures would even join together in the most peculiar of ways to deal with mortals should the need or fancy arise. But Ronnie did not have any other of his fellows today though he could not always be sure.

Ronnie immensely enjoyed the bowl of rice and Kafta he was consuming. He, in fact, was responsible for its marvelous taste. He had observed this particular vendor on many occasions. Now the vendor, Ayman, had fled with his family from Lebanon during the terrible civil war in 1980 to start a new life in America. While still struggling to establish himself, Ronnie observed him give a young hungry boy a meal. Now Ronnie had many gifts and abilities and one special ability he possessed was to look into the mind and heart of another. He knew that Ayman was having trouble feeding his own family and times were hard. Yet, he had taken pity on the boy and fed him. As a reward, Ronnie had appeared as a wizened old man from Lebanon speaking Ayman's native tongue. He purported to be from a region of the country where traditional food and culture was greatly admired. Ayman immediately recognized the region and delighted in finding another with whom he could converse about a beloved subject. Consequently, after he had praised Ayman for bringing Lebanon to America, he suggested certain spice proportions in Kafta along with specific types of ingredients for a Tahini sauce that was drizzled over the meat.

Ayman had listened with great interest and had been astonished at the marvelous flavor the mixture created. Though he never found the old man again to offer thanks, Ronnie knew well enough. Ayman prospered and was always charitable, even to Ronnie as a vagrant.

Ronnie watched Simon move off and waited. He waited because he observed a different man leaning on a nearby tree who had seen the knife drop as Simon walk away. Ronnie wanted to see what the man would do. The man strolled over to where the knife lay and glanced around. In the distance, Simon reached in his pocket and then spun around looking on the ground. He looked too and fro and started back. The man stepped casually on the knife and pretended to watch something in a different direction. Simon traced all the way back to where the man stood. He regarded the stranger for a moment and after hesitating asked, "Excuse me. Sorry to bother, but have you by chance seen a knife? I think it fell out of my pocket somewhere along here."

The man standing on the knife looked squarely at Simon, “No man, I just got here. Hadn’t seen anything.” He then went back to looking into the trees at nothing in particular. Simon looked on the ground, then at the man again and shrugged. When Simon had passed out of view, the man reached down and picked up the knife chuckling. He smiled and flipped the hooked blade open. He glanced over at Ronnie and gave a sly smile. Ronnie simply stared. The man turned and walked away, flipping the blade in and out. After about ten paces, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Ronnie still watching, expressionless. The man looked annoyed. He grinned with a curt laugh and shook his head. As he turned, he made an obscene gesture to Ronnie and walked off.

Ronnie reached out and examined the man’s mind, his intent, and his character. He saw images of the man’s past life and actions. “So, your name is Marcus,” Ronnie said quietly in his mind. Had Marcus turned around and observed Ronnie, he might have been disconcerted to see the sudden glitter in his eyes and the few dying teeth clinging to the smile on his face.

Ronnie glanced about and heard a squirrel barking above him. Now it’s well known that animals make noises and sounds so that everyone will know when danger is about. They are sensitive to the world about them and perceive things mortals don’t. They also sense moods of the faire creatures and Ronnie’s mood was alarming to the little creature.

“Just so, little one,” said Ronnie, “but I need to borrow you for a little while.”

Ronnie stood up and put the remains of his meal in the trash, for its well known that most of the faire creatures despise litter. Hefting his greasy worn knapsack, he walked to huge and ancient oak tree where the squirrel looked down at him. As Ronnie looked to the side, a little boy was kicking a ball and glanced up a Ronnie. Ronnie smiled and winked then walked behind the tree. The little boy, momentarily intrigued, waited for Ronnie to come out on the other side. He never reappeared. Puzzled, the child picked up his ball and cautiously walked about the tree, but Ronnie had vanished.

The little squirrel raced through the canopy of branches with a speed and agility that only a squirrel could have possessed. All afternoon, Ronnie trailed and watched Marcus. Time and again, Marcus did little things that were insensitive, mean spirited, disrespectful to older people and insensitive to animals that were doing nothing more than minding their own business. The worst was when he threatened another vagrant with the newly taken knife. He approached the half blind, overweight and mentally ill man, rifled the poor man’s backpack and threw it down in disgust when there was nothing of interest inside. He cut the straps out of spite leaving the helpless man to gather his belongings and worthless treasures as best he could. He cut flowers in the public sections where flowers were not to be cut, sniffed them only to throw them aside not long after. He went up to a table of a family having a meal and when they were busy watching the dog, walked by, and snatched up a piece of chicken from under their very noses. Ronnie had seen enough early on but continued to watch and finally follow Marcus home.

Observing from the treetops, he saw him descend steps go to an apartment below the street level of the building. It was not the best section of town but neither was it the worst. In any case,

Ronnie intended to pay Marcus a visit. Ronnie was pleased at such an opportunity since this fellow was easy to dislike and begged to be repaid in the same coin he had dealt.

As Ronnie came down from a tree he had perched upon, he remembered the squirrel who had been 'volunteered' for this errand. Knowing the poor creature would be run ragged and vulnerable, after Ronnie restored it, he placed a special mark upon the animal protecting him from those things that hunt with wings or with feet. Gently he placed the exhausted animal in the crook of the tree and departed.

That evening, Ronnie returned to the street outside the entrance to the alley that led to Marcus's flat. He was in the guise of a wrinkled old woman pushing a flimsy wire cart stuffed with various rags and junk. She wore a grimy smock and shoes that were disintegrating at every step. Anyone passing heard a phlegmatic deep cough and wheeze which he would spit into. The cloth was utterly revolting and layered with crusty stains of yellow and brown. If anyone happened to lock eyes with the shuffling creature, they would have seen weeping boils, bloodshot and baggy eyes that were constantly watering and the absence of any teeth. The stink arising from this disheveled woman was appalling. Several people who did pass visibly shuddered and gagged at this disaster of a human. The disguise, one of Ronnie's favorites, never failed to shock the big city sophisticates and only a few determined social workers and homeless center volunteers ever bothered to approach her.

Ronnie shuffled to the entrance of the alley and could see the steps leading down to the apartment and stared through the window. He saw Marcus through a pair of parted window curtains sitting on his couch absently watching baseball commentators sitting around a table. He was nursing a beer and absently flipping the knife blade open and closed. A sudden noise to Ronnie's left cause him to turn his head. A dog walker approached with five hounds leashed in a sort of human chariot. The dogs got within a few feet of Ronnie and all sneezed in sudden surprise. Almost as a unit they refused to approach the woman and dragged the visibly stunned dog walker to the other side of the walkway in avoidance.

Marcus was, in fact, nursing his third beer and waiting on an order of his favorite tamales. He glanced at his cell phone and saw the order was getting close according to the tracking application.

Three sudden, slow but strong knocks came at the door. He ran his hand through the thick mane on his head and stood up. "Odd way to knock," he thought to himself, "guess the homey thinks he's being funny." He opened the door and frowned. There was nobody there. He looked to either side, walked up the stairs and out on the street, but no one was anywhere close except a hunched bag lady some distance away hunched on a bench coughing and wheezing into a rag. The closest other people were some distance away walking at a leisurely pace.

Impulsively scratching his head, he shrugged, muttered to himself, and assumed it was some kids playing games and went back downstairs. He had just returned to his seat when three rapid knocks came. He walked over and opened the door but this time a delivery woman was there smiling with his order. Muttering his thanks, he started to close the door but changed his mind and waited a few seconds. He then followed the woman who bounded up the stairs and got into

a car that was waiting for her to go to another stop. The car had not been there earlier so the first knocks remained a mystery.

Marcus set his bag of food down on the coffee table and grunted with disgust at a sticky substance on part of the bag. Swearing, he went into the bathroom to wash his hands. As he wiped his hands, he heard a slight scurrying sound in the tub. Slowly pulling back the curtain he saw two large roaches sitting placidly flicking their antennae searchingly, testing the air. Disgusted, he threw back the curtain and tried several times to stomp on them. He grew frustrated. The roaches seemed to have the preternatural ability to evade his footfalls. Finally, he pulled out the hooked knife and reached down slowly. Grinning with perverse satisfaction, he skewered one and watched it desperately flail its legs. "Not so fast this time are you," he said. He did the same to the other and flushed them both down the toilet before cleaning off the tip of the knife blade.

His smile vanished when he returned to eat. There, on the dinner bag, was another roach that had discovered the sticky substance. He let out a snarl of anger and swatted at the insect. This succeeded only in miring the roach's legs to the substance. On a second swat, he only smeared the insect on the edge of his hand and a bulging egg sack emerged from the belly to get stuck in on the bag. Hurling a string of oaths, Marcus railed at the landlord, the delivery people and no one in particular. He cut open the bag and took out the food before depositing the revolting sack into the trashcan. Washing his hands again, he glanced reflexively around looking for more of the little invaders before settling down to eat.

Now as it turned out, Marcus is a fan of Mexican and Latin American food; he relishes it. Tonight, however, took a slightly different turn. He was ravenous and full of aggression. He scarfed down the first tamale which was drenched in his favorite sauce. It was at this point, that he realized something was amiss. He had just started on the second when his eyes went wide in shock and began streaming tears. He broke out into a sweat and mucus poured out of his nose. He stalked about the room and flapped his hands about. The tamales might as well have been made of hot coals. His mouth gaped open and he made strange barking noises as his tongue lolled out seemingly in a desperate effort to escape the inferno to which it was affixed. Nothing seemed to help. He let the sink Fawcett run over his tongue and he gulped water. He tried to drink milk but threw the container angrily in the sink when a clumpy, stinking curdled mass went into his gaping maw. Finally, after ten minutes of agony the intensity subsided.

Never in all his life had he experienced spice so hot. Ronnie, who sat invisible in a corner of the room enjoyed the spectacle. That is, until he saw Marcus let out a whoop with a smile on his face. Ronnie realized that Marcus enjoyed the fire. Worse, Marcus immediately sat down to continue his meal with great relish, albeit in a more measured manner. "So much for petty tortures," thought Ronnie to himself, "though he might not have that smug grin on his face later. He seems to have enjoyed it going in well enough, let's see about when it comes back out." Ronnie watched from a corner of the room unseen to the human eye until Marcus fell asleep sitting upright on the sofa.

In the morning, Marcus reached up to rub his eyes and felt something hard hit his forehead. Blinking open he saw the knife in his hand. He flipped it open on impulse. He smiled at its firm, crisp click and lowered his hand to set it down. To his surprise, it stuck to his hand. At first, he thought the sticky substance had somehow rubbed on the handle causing it to adhere to his hand. He shook harder and which this didn't work he pulled at it with his free hand until it felt like skin ripping. This, too, failed and he grew unsettled. He tried closing the blade back up but it was stuck in the open position and wouldn't budge. He sat up fully alarmed and tried prying it with his fingers and then the blade against the table. He might as well have tried pulling his own leg out of its socket.

He leaped to his feet and went into the kitchen. He tried using soap and water, butter, oil, a spatula, blade screwdriver and even the claw of a hammer. He ran the water as hot as he could stand it, and when that didn't work, tried ice. Nothing worked. He swore angrily and slammed his free hand upon the counter. It was then that he felt a deep gurgle in his bowels and sudden rush of pressure that demanded urgent attention. He stumbled rapidly towards the bathroom with his free hand frantically pushing against his posterior that seemed to be on the verge of a volcanic catastrophe. In his haste he caught his shin against the low coffee table causing him to howl with pain.

With small cries of desperation, he pushed towards the bathroom and started to reach for his buckle but was stymied by the clenched knife in his hand. Instantly the other hand was around virtually ripping at his belt and trousers while sweat poured down his face. His bowels were already leaking but, in the end, he managed to yank his pants free and sit down before disaster, though just barely.

What followed was nothing short of a cataclysm. His head shot back in relief but soon was followed with howls of pain when the previous night's spicy food rushed out like iron spiked wheels ripping and tearing with fire. A sudden loud thumping came from the ceiling from the residents above who apparently were protesting at the loud noises he was making. He swore darkly at the ceiling. Eventually, cramped and drenched in sweat, the abdominal pain subsided. This time, however, there was no whoop of enjoyment.

Indignity was compounded with indignity as he instinctively reached over to finish up when he saw a mere two thin sheets of toilet paper left. Ronnie not only curdled the milk the previous night but made certain to deplete the toilet paper and hiding any nearby supplies. The fairies were legendary at their skill and ability to hide and move things to the consternation of their victims. Eventually, he kicked off his shoes and pants and staggered in search for a replacement roll of tissue, which he eventually found just before having to resort to magazines or towels. With only one hand, his non-dominant, for use, he struggled at every step, muttering and cursing at his ill luck. Finally donning a pair of baggy pants and shirt he decided he had to get out for air.

Sweating profusely, he started with surprise and anger when he discovered the thermostat was set to and apparently stuck on the highest possible heat setting. If this wasn't galling enough, the refrigerator door was ajar and power out with water leaking. Marcus yelled expletives as everything was coming together in an unbelievable perfect storm of misery. He looked at his

hand and knew right away he could not simply walk about on the street with an open blade. He no longer cared anything for the knife. Although Marcus did not believe in curses, this turn of events was beginning to make him question his assumptions.

He picked up the hammer he had used to try and pry the handle from his hand but this time placed the blade against the edge of the counter to try and snap it off. At the first blow he screamed in pain and dropped the hammer clutching his hand. He stared dumbfounded. It was as if the knife was an extension of his body, living with blood and especially nerves. Bracing himself, he retrieved the hammer and struck a second time. Quickly, he put the hammer down and winced from the blows which now throbbed up and down his arm. He began to feel a sense of rising panic at this discovery.

He stared about uncertainly, sweat dripping from his forehead. Suddenly he heard a deep gurgling from the bathroom and ran to see the cause. The toilet was bubbling and began to backflow with everything from his bowels that he emptied earlier. He rushed to grab a plunger with his left hand and awkwardly worked it up and down to keep it from overflowing. In the other room, a series of rapid and insistent knocks began at the front door with an angry and indistinct voice. "I'm coming!" Marcus yelled in exasperation. The raw sewage began to subside but as he pulled the handle out, the head came loose and floated in the rank water. Turning in disbelief, he started to the door but as he crossed the living room the gurgling began again. He raced back into the bathroom and at the same time the knocking began again except louder and more insistently with an equally angry voice.

The toilet bowl was on the verge of overflowing. Snatching up the handle he realized that the plunger was still floating about and in rage he threw the handle down and stalked to the door. Flinging it open, he saw his landlady, Mrs. Ortega who, although barely 5 feet tall was a determined and fiery tempered lady. She started when she saw him. Marcus was glistening, drenched in sweat and had a wild desperate look in his face. She stepped back with the blast of heat and wrinkled her nose at the odor that struck her nose like a spiked bat. Her eyes went wide as she saw him panting and clutching the knife. She threw up her arms and ran up the stairs in alarm.

Ronnie, unseen in the room, was barely able to contain his laughter.

"No! No! No! Mrs. Ortega," he shouted realizing how he must appear, "You don't understand!" He dashed after her trying to explain. This, however, only made matters worse, since she glanced over her shoulder and saw only a crazed looking man, wide eyed and streaked with sweat and waiving a knife coming after her. She went pale and ran on howling. By the time he rounded the corner, she was through her door and had it bolted. He knocked on the door trying to explain, but she would not open it. Instead, he heard the word "police."

In desperation he looked about and breathed a sigh of relief. No one was present. He raced back downstairs and grabbed a shirt to wrap his hand. It passed for a crude wrapping that suggested some sort of hand injury. He stuffed his wallet in his pocket and went out the front door. This time, he ignored the gurgling and overflowing water that was continuing to come from the other room. As he closed the door, the handle came off in his hand and he wrathfully threw it to the

ground. Turning and pounding up the stairs, he made straight for his friend, Leon, who had an automotive body shop and a host of tools and chemicals that might remove the cursed blade from his hand.

He rushed inside to Leon and some of the workers who were relaxing from changing an axel on a truck. Stunned and at his appearance, they looked on speechless at the disheveled and crazed man who approached Leon. Pointing at the wrapped hand, Marcus frantically told Leon about his distressing situation. Marcus moaned in dismay when the shirt was ripped repeatedly when removed. It was his favorite football jersey with which he had hastily and inadvertently wrapped his hand.

They all clustered around and were stumped. Marcus explained all he had tried. They immediately set to work. Tools and solvents didn't work. One man, in a moment of inspiration, unexpectedly wheeled about with a blow torch and applied it to the end of the blade that was affixed to a vice. He was intending to melt the tip down but Marcus let out a howl of pain. Leon upbraided the man for his stupidity but the result was little better when a hacksaw was tried. To everyone's shock, blood gushed from the blade. They all stepped away, horrified, bewildered and now afraid. Marcus gasped in disbelief and wrenched opened the vice. He had endured enough. He bolted from the shop with all the workers shouting and racing to call him back. He raced down the street, blood covering his hand and spattering his clothes. At this point, Marcus lost his mind and ran on screaming madly and flailing his arms.

People recoiled in fear and amazement as he raced by waiving a bloody, knife wielding hand with the expression of total insanity. Finally, two police officers who had been looking for him at the behest of his terrified landlady spotted him and ordered him to stop. While slowing, Ronnie was beside himself and did not seem to hear them. They only saw a crazed man with a clenched knife dripping in crimson and babbled on about a cursed knife. They drew weapons and ordered him to stop, drop the weapon and lie down. Marcus didn't seem to understand them because he continued to rage at no one in particular and walked in a haphazard manner in their direction.

The police continued to issue warnings but time was running out. Leon and his workers raced up upon the scene and appealed to the police officers that something was indeed not right about the knife. Two more police officers arrived from behind and tackled Marcus. Despite their vigorous attempts and Marcus's shrieks of pain, they could not free the knife from his hand to cuff him. They too recoiled in shock when blood began to seep from where the blade was affixed to his skin. Assuming he had accidentally used a super-adhesive of some sort, they firmly bound the man and transported him to the hospital.

Marcus was administered a strong sedative which rendered him unconscious. To everyone's surprise and subsequent shock, the knife would not be removed and the first attempt to cut the handle or blade resulted in the metal gushing blood. Everything they tried failed and any cut or damage to the blade resulted in a steady flow of blood that did not seem to want to stop. Finally, the hospital staff and police began to realize that it was little surprise that Marcus should be driven to insanity by this event.

When Marcus came out from his sedation, he was questioned about the knife in his hand which was firmly cuffed and wrapped to the gurney. Desperate, he told the seemingly insignificant event of picking up the knife, but it was only when he finally admitted deceiving the owner of its loss that the blade began to become loose. Sensing that his misdeed had something to do with this curse, Marcus broke down and told of all the things he had done that day, every little injustice, every little petty theft and discourtesy. He then told of what had befallen him the previous night and when he awoke.

He then fell back asleep from the emotional release of the effort. When he awoke, the knife was gone and, despite a vigorous search, it was nowhere to be found. Since no one had been hurt, Marcus was not charged with anything and it was generally agreed that the punishment, from wherever and whomever it came, had more than satisfied the debts owed for the crimes. It was judged that he had suffered enough.

He was released and the police were kind enough to explain to the landlady the particulars of the events though omitting the part about the blade actually bleeding. Evidently, no one wanted to pursue that mysterious part of the tale. Mrs. Ortega, being a religious woman, nodded and recognized a humbled and contrite man when she saw it. Nevertheless, she had a priest bless the building for good measure. This step by the landlady was particularly amusing to Ronnie. Thereafter, she and many others found Marcus to have changed. He became a decent, respectful, and helpful man who spared no small effort at doing a good turn. He volunteered to do small jobs for Ms. Ortega and became much friendlier to those around him with a kind word or good deed.

Simon was sitting in a coffee shop when he heard the story about the man who had dashed about waiving a knife. He shook his head at the report of yet another instance of a troubled city. Reaching into his pocket to assure himself that his phone and keys were present, he felt an additional bulk. Frowning, he stood up and pulled out all the items in his pocket. To his utter astonishment, his knife, which he had presumed lost, was in his hand. It was not the first time he had thought things lost, but he had no other explanation and assumed this was another absent-minded oversight of his. He looked across the walk at an old woman with a shopping cart. She was the most wretched human being he had ever seen. Looking at his empty plate of eggs benedict and croissants with orange marmalade, he sat back down and ordered the same thing to go. The stench was terrific as he approached the old lady, but he felt good inside from the twinkle in the old lady's eyes and grateful hands that received the box of food.

The Dragon and the Demon

Creirwy stepped gingerly over the rocks in the river Clydach that was swollen from recent rains in pursuit of an errant sheep. This Ram, a gaunt one named 'Pla', whose name meant 'pest' for his ill-mannered disposition, had earlier hopped over an irregular path of rocks across the water to an eyot dense with trees and brush. The rest of the flock remained in the glade occasionally glancing at the girl's jerky motions as she jumped from stone to stone to the watching animal. Shortly before Creirwy started towards her sheep, a different one strayed out of the flock and into the encircling thick woods. Pryderi, Creirwy's elder brother, went in search of this one.

This glade was some distance from their home. Several days previous, Pryderi wandered over a series of hills and entered a huge primeval forest. This forest, rumored to be the home of fairy folk, was comprised of virgin oak, ash, beech, and sweet chestnut whose giant limbs created a seemingly endless interwoven network of branches. In his explorations in this woodland, Pryderi also observed a number of mystical Rowan trees and numerous fairy circles upon the ground. The forest as a whole was unlike any he had ever seen. Upon his initial discovery of the area, he observed that many of the ancient trees would take six men with arms outstretched to form a circle around the trunks. Through out the growth, a thick but not disagreeable mist lingered. Quite suddenly, when he came out of the trees, he discovered a glade by a riverbank.

In this idyllic glade, the water from the passing river was sweet, clear, and cool for both drink and tired feet. Large bushes of blackcurrant and gooseberry were spaced here and there and even a delightful Denbigh plum tree from which jams are made. Fish were numerous in deep pools and eddies and it seemed to the children that the clusters of lounging fish were waiting just for them. The pair delighted in catching fat chub and trout though just as often they caught the infamous barbel which one took their chances in eating. Upon his return, he found a narrow path along the river bank that skirted the forest that would make bringing his flock to this spot an easy task.

When he showed Creirwy the spot, she was thrilled and both enjoyed the location. Now, however, the irritating Ram named Pla ruined the peace. He would make no effort to recross the rushing water himself and it was left to her to force him back.

"Foolish sheep," she cried angrily as she stepped gingerly from one rock to the other, "is there not enough on this side to content your belly! You sluggard! There are no tender grasses over here, no berries, not plums. Only rocks as hard as your head! Stubborn beast! You wish me drowned?" The sheep stared back placidly with its dark eyes which seemed almost to mock her. This only served to increase her anger. "Would to Arawn you should get your just reward and his great wolf Puca snatch you from my flock, I should be forever obliged," she muttered watching her feet, "You, among all your brethren, wander the most and cause us much grief."

Suddenly, she cried out as her foot went out from under her. She tumbled into the water forwards and was swept to the side striking her head against a submerged stone. Looking about frantically, her vision began to fade and all went black.

When she came too, she was stretched out upon the land again. Glancing towards the forest edge, the rest of her sheep stood cowed together and stared anxiously past her. Turning about, she spied a most curious thing. There were two huge luminous eyes, bright with curiosity and humor. They narrowed as their gaze locked with hers. She blinked and rubbed her eyes.

"Surely I am dreaming," she said slowly. Looking again, she saw the eyes connected to a long muzzle and nostrils. Looking further, she saw a long scale covered serpent's body with limbs and a long tail stretched lazily about. The creature was a greenish hue with sparkles of gold and silver that glittering and shimmered.

"What can this be," she asked in fear and amazement, "Are you real?" Next to her was a creature of enormous size with a sleek body that stretched at least twenty long yokes if not more (which to later generations might be recognized as more than 32 feet).

"Indeed, I am," it said with a grin. Its voice was deep and smooth, full of calm dignity and not the least alarming but rather musical and friendly. "I might ask the same of you," the creature continued, "little one that thinks she is a fish."

"Who are you?" Creirwy asked in amazement, "What manner of animal might you be?"

"If you mean my name, little fish girl," it said, "I am a one of the draig or dragons as you sometimes call my kind. In Wales, you have, perhaps heard of my kinsman who is a flashy red and used by your kings to frighten others? Ah…I see the look of surprise. Did you think him the only one? Silly child, there are many of us. My right and proper name…how shall I say it? Hmm…I fear 'tis not so easy for you mortals but perhaps the name Arach will do. Arach the green. That is what they called me in Ireland across yonder sea to the west."

"But," Said Creirwy now intrigued and crossing her legs and forgetting her fear, "we are told that you are dangerous, eat all sheep, goats and milk cows and that it is unwise to keep company of such monsters."

"Monsters!" cried Arach with indignation, "Well I was told not to keep company with little fish girls! For they do not know who they are and are more apt to be treacherous and discourteous than even the ill-mannered wolves that roam these lands! You might have feigned falling only to lure me to the water then snatch me and carry me off"

"I am no fish girl," said Creirwy with rising anger, "Nor am I some hairy, yellow-toothed wolf. True, I am a girl but no fish! I am good and true, not treacherous. And you are too big for me to move. Even one of your nails on your hand could I not master for they are as large as an ewe and seem spears to my eyes."

"Ah," said Arach with a mocking grin, "well then certainly you could be magic and be very dangerous indeed. For a goblin or ugly hag of the mountains can appear helpless yet charm the boldest into their own doom. Yes, I think that perhaps you are girl who acts a fish to lure the unwary as the goblins would do."

Creirwy sprang to her feet in fury clenching her fists, "I am no fish nor any foul goblin but a girl from the valley over the distant rise."

“Hmm…Perhaps not a fish or a goblin for they smell much worse and you are not ugly,” said Arach narrowing his eyes, grinning with laugher, and leaning forward with keen observation, “But while it is true that I am a dragon, I am not a monster. And while it is true that some of my kindred can cause mischief and be discourteous, that is no less true of your own kind. I shall have to keep a most wary eye upon you.”

Creirwy considered this reply turning the remark over in her mind to see if it was an insult then finally shrugged and held her tongue. She had no good reply and it seemed unwise to antagonize such a mighty thing as a dragon.

“Perhaps,” said Arach thoughtfully and cocking his head, “We may become friends instead? I shall not call you a fish girl, goblin, or even smelly girl. And, it is hoped, you will regard me in a more pleasant light than a monster. You perhaps, will decide that for yourself. As you may see, I can be a good and loyal friend to those who respond in kind. Do me the kindness, my new friend, of acquainting me with your name for I find it rather rude to simply call you girl.”

Creirwy courteously nodded with a bow, for it seemed the right thing to do. “I am called Creirwy,” she said proudly. Arach slowly brought himself to a half-raised position and bowed deep.

“It is an honor to meet you Creirwy,” he said, “I suppose you know the strength of your fine name?”

Her face lit up with pleasure, “Indeed I do! I am told that it is the same as one of the most beautiful maids in all the islands.”

“Indeed,” said Arach, “and a name that befits you.” This, of course, caused the girl to turn red with embarrassment.

“Tell me,” He continued, “You have a brother do you not? For I have seen him. Yet, he has dashed off into the woods. Is he like the Morfran of legend who was brother to the Creirwy, dark and hideous? Is he wicked and now run off to abandon you to the wolves so that they may feast among the choicest of the flock and tear you to pieces?”

Creirwy looked horrified, “Oh no Arach. He is nothing like that. He is called Pryderi. He is a good and true brother and went only to fetch one of the sheep that strayed like the stubborn one on yonder isle…”

She suddenly screwed up her face as she looked past Arach to the island and scanned it. She turned to the cowed flock and counted the heads.

“We are still missing two,” she said scratching her head, “My dear brother has not yet returned with his quarry and I do not see the one that was on the island, stupid Ram that it is.”

“Ah,” said Arach looking uncomfortable, “that one.”

“You ate him?” she said with realization, “you ate our sheep?”

“Well, yes. I will not lie to you my friend,” he said gently, “I do not lie to my friends, and hope they return the favor. Nor will I deny that which I do. It is right to acknowledge one’s deeds don’t you think? Why else do them if you must hide in shame?”

“But,” Creirwy started to say, “Yes, all you say is true but that was our sheep.”

“Yes,” he said looking aside with fond memories of the taste, “It was a decent sheep, but not particularly fat and plump as I should have liked. I did, however, notice a certain hint of something disagreeable about him. Perhaps it was his ill-mannered nature. No doubt you tend them well and do not spare the best grasses for their endless appetite. But surely you would not begrudge me one of your sheep for having plucked you from the river so that you would not be drowned?”

Creirwy pursed her lips and bowed her head, “Forgive me Arach, I spoke rashly. I owe you for my life and I shall not soon forget it. I am well pleased that you should have it for, in truth, that beast was full of mischief and would not heed our call. He delights in playing games and leads the others away when we are not looking.”

“Well then,” said Arach delighted, “we have done one another a great service and are already on a grand start to a good friendship. I watched his insolence and tell you that ere he met his end he proclaimed himself the chief and referred to you as a, how shall I put it nicely, a dullard. For the languages of mortals and beasts I know well enough.”

At this remark Creirwy’s face darkened. “So,” she said blackly, “a chief is he and I a dullard? Indeed, you have given him a reward such as he deserves for had I but known this I would have shorn him on his haunches and given him such a hiding that he should soon know who was master!”

At this proclamation Arach laughed deeply for the girl’s spirit was of fire and her indignation a burning brand waiving in the night.

“I have fresh milk, cheese, bread and even a sweet cake that my mother gave us,” she suddenly announced laughing with Arach and beaming with delight, “I would be most pleased if you would share.”

“How could I refuse an offer such as that,” he said and lowered himself to the ground again, “Though I am not so overly fond of bread. Honey in the cakes are a mighty treat and I seldom get such a rich offering as that!”

They sat and chatted about the forests and streams, the plums and the berries and the magnificent and venerable trees that grew in this region. He told of how the wolves never came near him when he was about since they had lost in a contest of riddles with him. And though they might grumble and complain, even they were obliged to honor their defeat by not intruding upon his place of rest or poaching upon his food. Should they dishonor it, as an occasional one had done, he would drench them with river water or toss them over the hills with great humiliation in front of their brethren. No self-respecting wolf could stomach such a thought.

The flock of sheep, thanks to soothing words from Arach, began to feel more comfortable and soon were grazing even about the dragon's outstretched tale. Occasionally, to his annoyance, they would try to nudge him out of the way for the hidden grass beneath his tail.

"Your dear brother returns," said Arach looking towards the woods. The trees were dense and it was not until Pryderi stepped into the clearing did he behold the large creature lazing by the river engaged in light chatter and apparently engaged in a leisurely picnic with his young sister. He turned deathly pale and for a moment could not speak or move.

"Come dear brother," said Creirwy, "Do not be afraid. This is Arach the green and he has saved me from certain death. I went to fetch that miserable blockhead of a sheep and fell into the river. But for him, I would be lost. He and I are now fast friends and we bid you join us."

Pryderi was fifteen and good with animals and pathfinding. He was not a fool and less trusting than his younger sister, but he reluctantly came forward momentarily forgetting the sheep who had more wisely refused to put one hoof in the clearing until Arach muttered something in 'sheepish' and the beast obligingly joined its brethren.

"Hail and well met Pryderi," said Arach with a genuine laugh, "fear not for your sister speaks the truth. For if not, would not your flock have already been gobbled up by the wicked monstrous dragon that has been described to you by others? Would not I have lain in wait to catch you unawares and completed my meal with the tender flesh of children as you have been told would happen? Come forth and join us! Your name, like that of your sister, is a mighty one and well known among my kindred. Let not it be said that you shamed the name of he, the mighty Pryderi of old, whose name you bear."

Pryderi listened in wonder at the manners and soft speech of Arach and was greatly flattered by his complements. He soon felt no fear and joined his sister. As they ate, he learned of the events of the day and how Arach lived on the eyot in the river and was not seen by any save those who knew what to look for. Soon Pryderi eagerly pledged his friendship to the delight of everyone.

"I propose," Arach said, "that we might help one another. For you see, we draig are not all bad. I can bid the waters to rise and fall, help the grass stay green in the hottest summers with the coolness of my breath and make the grains grow with the lure of my song. I can bring clouds to shade the village with rain and moisture to slake the thirst of the trees and shrubs. For those who bring mischief, I can stir the mists from the bogs to confound their journey by walking in circles. Yet I also leave dewdrops for butterflies and the pixies to taste on flower petals. For such power is a gift of mine from the very earth itself. I owe allegiance to the earth and care for it as do my fellow creatures of fairy. The Rowan trees you no doubt passed through are tended by the fairy folk and many a goblin and hag have turned aside grumbling because of this tree.

You have, perhaps, seen how I and others bring light to the skies? We create oceans of green and blue at night that swirl and flow from the great dark north over the mountains and hills. Such displays delight those in the world of fairy and they, in turn, bring me news of the land, its hurts, its wicked people and its pleasant things.

Yet, I too grow hungry. I will catch the deer that stray to close and the occasional sheep, goat or even your delicious milk cows should they stray too far. It seems a fair matter to lay claim for such a meal since no good owner would be so careless in allowing such fine animals to stray, would they? One must conclude that they were simply not fit for their master's herd and had been turned out."

Pryderi and Creirwy were not entirely convinced of this logic but did not interrupt.

"Should the wolves find them first," Arach continued, "then they will certainly consume them. I, being no less in need of sustenance, likewise enjoy their tasty flesh. Afterall, why should a nasty noisy wolf have a sheep and a draig go without? I have tasted wolf but once and they are most disagreeable in every way. But I do not invade the flocks of the shepherds nor gobble up the little children that are disobedient and wander to far from their mother's care. I am not one of the ugly toothless crones or malicious goblins that plague the people of the valleys, the mountains, or waters.

Those wicked creatures delight in tormenting others and bringing misery and misfortune. It was they who enchanted the barbel fish of the sea to grow the painful spines. It was they who taught the barbel of the river to eat certain things that brough aches to the bellies of those who ate them. Sometimes especially sly and tricksy goblins, not fearing the Rowan as much, come in the woods and do awful things. They sing terrible screeching and scratching songs that hurt one's ears and make the birds flee. Or, they chase away the deer with hoots and using switches on them so that I might not eat. They even try to trick the wolves into coming around but even the sly wolf knows better than to listen to such foolish babble. I repay them in their own coin. Woe to the goblin that I catch. My tail can slap hard as the stoutest cudgel and my breath, should I wish it, can curdle the freshest milk in an instant. More than one has gone to his hole with lumps on his head or made him hang his head with shame around his fellows as they hold their noses.

Have you not noticed these past two seasons how the oats have been full, the sheep fat and wooly and cows produce the finest and sweetest of milk? Do not the rains come faithfully and in proper measure while the herbs for medicines become good and flowers bloom as rainbows on every stem? The hot days have waned in proportion to the cool and the night breezes carry the silver blossoms of the moon and music of the fair folk to your hearths and dreams?"

Both Pryderi and Creirwy considered this and nodded vigorously.

"It is not so in all places," continued Arach, "For anywhere we draig call home, we desire calm and peace and speak to the earth to make it so. To the far north, sometimes you hear the squabbles and war making of the black dwarves who come up from their caverns and smithies. There are also the mountain giants who join with the dwarves and quarrel with the great Taranis.

Their tantrums and battles are frequent but we draig, contrary to what is told, do not like to be disturbed by their hammering and drumming and war making. We like the songs of the birds, the sweet voices of singing elves in the gentle breezes and calming murmuring in the streams and rivers. So, when they commence to battling, it is a calamity of noise and shaking. They set forth in lines of battle and use their sorcery, drums, and hammers to wage their battles. Such

inconsiderate neighbors are not welcomed. I am not ashamed to say that my draig breath turns them. I give them the stench of soured milk and henbane in my breath. They cough, gag and retch then make a run for it. They cast aside their drums and mattocks and thus cannot summon their spells that make the mighty storms sweep down from the North."

Arach roared with laughter at the memories of these moments.

"We break their mighty assault with such tricks and spells of our own," he continued, "and it changes their onslaught of storms to mere gentle rain and soft breezes. I have brought peace to your fair valley though you did not know it. I do not often see mortals nor do I care for them to see me for they would hunt me with arrows and slings and seek to drive me from my place of rest when I offered no offense but rather peace and prosperity. Such discourtesy is hard to endure!"

"But why," said Pryderi seeing the dilemma and feeling shame for the conduct of his own kind, "why do you not seek them out and speak as we have to you? Would they not understand?"

Arach considered the thought and sighed, "I have, on occasion, done so as have my brethren. But all draig are feared in these lands and others. Yet, there are different types of us. I speak, some do not. Some have wings, I do not. I have limbs and nails, some do not. Some are greedy, hoard treasures and do battle with mighty heroes who really come to take treasure that does not belong to them. Not all treasures are the same. Some of us value peace and solitude and the gentle ways of the forests to heaps of gold and silver.

Some people in the far north claim a great being called Aegir and his daughters live in great halls under those violent seas. They greatly fear the great Jörmungandr who is said in their tales to circle the whole of the world. Though I have heard such stories from men and women, I am less familiar with them, and have not met this great Jörmungandr. In lands far from here and a people too numerous to count, we are greatly respected, honored, and even thought of as good fortune. It is most curious how you mortals regard us in various places.

But here, we are treated with dread by some and mighty by others. You are young, my beautiful flaxen hair friends, and you understand now that we can be friends. But the men of the world are wary because of some of the wicked deeds and false tales of others. Even now in your own lands, men in robes with their cult of a nailed man have been waging war on all that is foreign to them. All draig and fairy folk are despised by these men who think we are all evil.

But consider this. I shall continue to bring peace and balance to your fair valley if you would but bring me a sheep once a month. Fear not, for I will cause your flocks to produce plenty enough for your loss. Each farmer should consider my offer. I get weary of trout and chard and would prefer the sweet marrow of cracked bones and tender flesh. The stones I get while fishing I do not like at all and I become ill-tempered. Convince your folk of my good will and we should all live in peace and good will. What say you to that?"

"Indeed," they both cried leaping to their feet, "We shall go at once to tell our father and others. For surely, they will listen."

With great enthusiasm, the friends parted with bows and courtesy and the two siblings drove their sheep home.

Not too kindly was their tale received though the berries and plums they had gathered were liked well enough. Though he was familiar with its insolent disposition, their father grew exceedingly angry at the loss of his Ram. Instead, he gave them a sound hiding for risking their lives, the flock and telling tall tales. Their mother was terribly frightened at the new place over the distant hillocks in the strange woods and wailed at their children's lack of love for their parents. They were sympathetic to Creirwy's the fall in the water for indeed she had an ugly knot on her head which seemed to confirm at least part of their tale. Be that as it may, their parents were certain the knot was but a ruse to explain their carelessness and inattention during some game. Despite their pleading, their parents refused to listen and forbade them telling anyone else less they bring laughter and scorn on down on their heads.

The next day, they returned to the glade by another way since their mother watched with crossed arms from the door with deep suspicion. Though banned from visiting the glade again, they were encouraged to bring back any further plums and berries from the safer areas they were expected to use.

Upon returning to the small riverside spot, they lamented their plight to their friend Arach who sighed and expressed that he was not the least surprised.

Upon a chance, one of Arach's river elf friends, Brigid, was visiting at the time of their arrival. While hiding among the sheep, the nymph listened with great interest at the plight of the children and took it upon herself to help.

Strolling up behind the children, she startled the pair with her melodious voice and rich laughter. She was beautiful to behold and appeared to be a girl roughly Creirwy's size and age but donned in flowing garments that had a certain sheen to them. Her eyes seemed to sparkled as the stars on the clearest night sky. Quickly, she whispered into the Creirwy's ear and before Pryderi could speak, led the girl away with a dash.

Worried at first, Pryderi fretted about his sister's absence for she had plunged into the woods and vanished. Arach, however, although still uncertain what Brigid was about, reassured him that she was a good friend and would let no harm come to the girl for Brigid was the dearest of friends and in no way treacherous. Pryderi was then reassured. He and Arach told stories but Pryderi was the more amazed of the two. Arach had lived long by the reckoning of even the most sagely of men, longer even than the histories of the mysterious Druids and Sagas in other green lands. The stories of warriors, chieftains, beautiful maidens, and epic tales of the lords of Ireland and Scandia left the young lad open mouthed.

Arach, in his turn was grateful for the skill of the young man who seemed a wizard at luring the best fish too his basket which he shared with Arach along with cheese, milk and sweet cakes. He listened to Pryderi's tales of the common folk and daily life which to Pryderi's mind was of no account but not so to Arach. Arach delighted in hearing of the real people since kings, wizards and warrior tales were all too common and predictable. He delighted in the stories of simple

people, the tricks they played on one another, the happy moments children were born, gay summer festivals and different foods.

The sheep, in their grazing, were content with the marvelous sweet grasses but always kept a wary eye on Arach. His soft compelling words in their own language made them feel reassured, but they still were unsettled by the hungry eyes he occasionally cast in their direction. He was, after all, a dragon and dragons ate sheep.

In late afternoon, Pryderi had waited long for his sister and grew anxious for he could not abandon his sister and he knew his parents were already certain be angered at their return after the sun had gone to bed. He was at a loss in what to do for the not so gentle strokes of his father's strap was not something to be desired. Rising to gather his flock, he began to speak of his fear to Arach when, quite unexpectedly, Creirwy burst dancing from the woods laughing and adorned with beautiful flowers in her hair. So beautiful was she that Pryderi staggered back in wonder for his sister was glowing with a radiance that rivaled the silver brilliance of the moon. For a moment, he thought she was perhaps a river nymph or elvish sister to Brigid who held her hand in love. She carried a basket of woven vine filled with the most wonderful flowers whose pleasing scent filled the air. Yellow Trefoils and scarlet Pimpernels, yellow broom and white yarrow, purple mallow, and Primrose along with orchids of splendor filled her arms. In her golden hair was woven delicate centuary with cuckoos and bluebells. In the pocket of her apron were magnificent Penny Bun mushrooms of enormous size that were a great delight in any household.

"Dear brother," Creirwy laughed, "Brigid has revealed to me the most wondrous secret place for flowers and mushrooms. It is a secret, my beloved brother, a place for which I am bound to keep secret even from you and our dear sister. Brigid and her sisters sang the most wonderful songs for me and they wove scented flowers into my hair and brushed it with silver and gem dust! Come! I must sing for you and Arach for Brigid has taught me their magic! Woe to the one who has never heard the voice of their people!"

She sat with Brigid beside her who touched her cheek and held her hand with a radiant smile. The fading sun glittered in her hair and warmed her cheeks as she turned to the Western sky. Her eyes glittered and she sang such as her brother or even Arach had never heard. She sang of woods and trees, flowers and glades with glistening moss and opening flowers to the morning sun. She sang of golden streamers through leaves in the green forests of Britannia and moon beams on sliver meadows where fairies danced in twilight. She sang of faraway lands in Ireland where the harp plucked every soul, of Scandia and Lapland where heroes were made into legend. She wove into gentle melody the voices of trees that drank from sweet pools which fed streams and rivers from hidden lands and of peoples unknown. When she had finished, tears were in their eyes and Brigid kissed her new sister upon her soft lips. The forest had gone silent in wonder and even the river seemed to have slowed to bend its ear. When she finished, the sun was replaced with stars and moonlight which glittered on the precious dust in her hair and flashed white fire.

“Such a voice I have not heard in mortals,” said Arach moved and astonished, “only the innocence of a child touched with the love of a fair maiden like Brigid could such music make my heart weep. Surely Brigid, you have bestowed a gift no mortal deserves?”

Brigid stepped up to the nose of Arach and scolded him with a gentle voice. “Stay your judgement mighty Arach,” she began, “for the heart and mind of children are pure and their voice unspoilt by the cares of this world. They feel and perceive with the heart of a nymph. Your power lies mighty upon the land and in the skies, but ours lies in bringing beauty upon the land, in music and in tales told. Our gifts are freely given to those whom we find deserving.”

“Be not angry with me Brigid,” said Arach now humbled, “tis a mighty gift you have given her. Truly she is worthy for she has touched my heart and filled it with the magic of the world you so easily command and that I have forgotten.”

Brigid turned, satisfied at Arach’s contrition, and came to Creirwy. “You must go now and give to your mother and elder sister these gentle tokens for they will understand their meaning. You must tell them one thing more…” Brigid bent to the child’s ear and whispered. Creiwy’s eyes with wide with wonder and a smile of delight crossed her face.

“Remember my little sister,” she admonished with a stern look and upraised finger, “you must tell no one but them or I shall come and pluck your eyebrows out and tangle your hair as you sleep.”

Despite Pryderi’s goading, his sister would whisper nothing of what the fairy Brigid had said.

At home, both father and mother were waiting at the door for night was advancing ere they returned.

“Back to your secret place I’ll warrant,” said their mother scowling, “See how the sun has long since gone to bed. Should I count their heads to bemoan yet more lost sheep? Do you have another knot on that little head of yours or is it Pryderi’s turn to drown? Your father already has his strap at the ready. You shall bring disgrace and ruin upon us if you are not consumed by wolves first.”

Ignoring the irate woman, Creirwy, who she had not at first seen, came around from the back and presented the bouquet to her mother and waiting elder sister. They took in their breath, irritation forgotten, and gaped at her beauty. They were speechless. They marveled at the sparkle in the girl’s eyes and skillfully woven flowers in her hair. They touched the brushed glittering hair with wonder and knew that it was not the child’s own hand that had done such a thing.

Despite their annoyance, they could not bring themselves to scold and begged to know how she had been so adorned. Quickly, they took her aside and questioned her closely. “These flowers are yours my mother and dear sister,” Creirwy began, “they are from Brigid who said they are your favorites. Both women were delighted and stirred deeply at the great beauty of the gift.

“But child, who is this Brigid,” her mother began, “is she from a neighboring village? Surely, she is among the most skilled weavers to have put these flowers in your hair for see, they do not wilt. Never have I seen such beaty as these nor have I heard of her.”

Grumbling with disgust at how easily his heretofore irate wife had been won over by flowers, their father stalked outside and walked over to count the sheep while Pryderi went with him.

Looking about the room for anyone else, Creirwy was satisfied they were alone, "When is my sister to be born?" Reeling with shock, both older women put their hands to their mouths.

"Who told you such a thing girl," said her mother growing pale, "for what you say is true, but I have not told anyone but your sister here, not even your father. I told her only today when you were away and your father was in the market."

"Brigid told me, "She said beaming, "she said the flowers were to bless you and my new little sister."

Creirwy's mother burst into tears of joy and confusion for now she understood that her child did not lie. Indeed, the family paid great respect to the fair folk and had asked for another child.

"But surely it is only Brigid the river elf you speak of that you have met," she said, "for we know of such folk. What is this nonsense of a dragon? We will forgive you for the loss of the sheep for he was reckless and we value you more than his wooly stubborn hide. But do not keep up this silly lie to us about such creatures."

"It is no lie mother," she said screwing up her face with consternation, "Arach is our friend. Brigid sent these tokens that you might believe the truth of what is told you."

Brigid's mother and sister looked at each other in confusion for they did not now know what to believe.

On the following day, Creirwy's mother ordered her father to go with them. Muttering about childish nonsense, he nonetheless respected the traditions of fairy folk and dared not be insulting since he had now been told of the gift and news of the nymph Brigid.

Pryderi and Creirwy led their father through the valley to the small riverside pasture. He was frightened at the size and number of giant trees and thick growth which made him feel small. But the air was clean and full of a strange calm he found intriguing. Upon seeing the little glade, he grudgingly admitted the grass was tender and of a quality unlike any he had ever seen. Despite the children calling his name, Arach did not appear, nor did Brigid. Sighing heavily, their father, though puzzled bout the news of the unborn child and Creirwy's appearance, could not understand their reluctance to let go of this story about a dragon. Setting that aside, he was content enough to spend the afternoon in this remarkable place. Pryderi and his father laughed as they brought in fat trout from the river for his father was an excellent fishman and caught plenty at this riverside this day. Creirwy gathered berries and the plums for home. Soon he understood why his children had so enjoyed the place and made a promise to return as often as he could.

Suddenly, as he bent to drink water, he stumbled and fell into the river. Unable to swim, he floundered and began to be swept away. The children shouted and waived frantically but knew not what to do since none of them knew about the art of swimming. All might have been lost save the sudden movement from the eyot where a long tale reached out and scooped the hapless

man from the water and placed him gently upon the banks. As the father gasped for breath, drenched and chilled to the bone, his eyes went wide when he saw Arach become visible and move effortlessly across the water. For he had remain concealed until he saw he was needed.

“Hail and good health to you dear father,” said Arach coming to rest and bowing before the terrified man, “Fear not for your children are noble in heart and are my fast friends. Be not angry with them for they did tell you the truth that I was here and Brigid sent word only last night.”

“Aye,” he gasped smiling in wonder, “Indeed she did and what wonderous news she brought! Forgive my doubt Arach for the imagination of children is great and the claims of what they see are not always fair and honest.”

“Spoken truly,” laughed Arach, “but no less a claim may be said about big folk. Your children have shown themselves to be true of spirit and heart. You are favored indeed to have such youth for they bring great credit and joy to you and your household.”

“Truly,” said their father with a smile and not knowing what to make of his rescuer.

“Father,” said Creirwy, “we should give him one of our flock for he saved you from becoming drowned when you fell. It is only right and just. That is what he did for me.”

Their father, whose name was Cedric immediately came to his feet. “Indeed Arach,” Cedric said, “but for your mercy I should leave only a widow and fatherless children. Please take one of your choice for I have no other gift I might offer save only my own life and those of my children.”

“You are generous,” said Arach please, “but fear not, I should not ask so high a price as you or your kin.”

Pryderi had already taken one and led it to Arach who quickly snapped up the hapless sheep and gobbled him whole. Arach, though hungry and exceedingly delighted with the taste of tender sheep was well mannered and would not chew with his mouth agape for that was unforgivably rude by anyone with decent manners. Moreover, he was sensitive to the flock watching him and thought better of upsetting the rest of the flock watching their companion meet its end amid a dragon’s busy teeth.

“They told you of my suggestion?” Arach began while picking his teeth with a long talon (which is a habit now frowned upon in the company of others), “And forgive my eating in front of you for I am hungry today and your visit was timely indeed. A sheep tastes better than fish thought the trout and chard are fat and plentiful. The squirrels are but a tiny morsel and not worth the bother and the deer have grown wise to my presence.”

“They did tell me of a bargain,” said Cedric, “though I thought nothing of it. I was certain that it was the story of foolish children that had forsaken their duties and spun a tale to cover up their mistake.”

“Be assured,” said Arach with a smile, “It is not a lie. They do not lie to me and I not to them. If find truth more agreeable for in holding ourselves to truth among friends, we might avoid doing the things that would make us wish to lie and thereby be disgraced and dishonored.”

“That is true and well spoken,” said Cedric who began mentally examining his own behavior in the face of such obvious good behavior.

“Then tell me good father,” said Arach, “might we find common cause in a bargain? Might we both find benefit and friendship in my proposal? For I will recompense you for the sheep you offer. Though the sheep certainly shall find the bargain an unfavorable one, you shall find your numbers increase for I will not let you suffer on my account. I am no farmer and would be a poor shepherd for I do not go hunting for tender shoots to graze upon. I’ve no patience for insolent sheep who desire nothing more than to run about here and there leaving me to run after them. Such are the tasks for young stout boys and girls.”

“Indeed,” said Cedric now having fully recovered his courage and wit, “I shall go forthwith to speak with the men of the village. For they are in debt to you and know it not. They are good men, strong and true. Our wives are sturdy and thrifty and shall agree to an increase in good fortune. They will listen to reason and already honor the fair folk, though they knew not that you dwelt in our midst.”

Thus, they spent the afternoon together and shared food. Cedric was awed by Creirwy’s nightingale’s voice and song. When they returned home, Cedric related all that had happened to his wife and they quickly spread the word.

One by one, the village folk, near and far, began to understand. Some ventured to the glade and met the dragon. Many were afraid and had to be revived from fright, but all respected Arach and gave heed to his words and bargain. True to his declaration, for every sheep they provided, two were born…one to replace and one to add. As might be expected, word traveled among the sheep who were most unhappy with the arrangement and drew lots to see who the unfortunate offering would be.

The weather was fair, the temperatures perfect and the soils rich. Flowers burst into color and harvests were the finest for years with mushrooms and herbs overflowing. As the years passed, Arach watched Creirwy and Pryderi grow and Brigid blessed them all with song and joy. Brigid’s sisters danced at night around Creirwy’s little sister named Elin for her eyes were indeed very bright with life.

Soon Pryderi reached the rites of manhood and Arach spoke to his ancient fellow draig and sowed blue and green magic in the night sky while the village elders lit fires and conducted the sacred traditions. Pryderi had learned from the elvish folk how to play the harp and soon charmed both beast and man with his skill. It was said that all sorrow was banished from a soul with his playing and even the most truculent child would become calm and mesmerized.

Creirwy, in her turn, reached the rites of womanhood and was adorned richly with flowers and silver dust in her hair while her mother and sisters fitted her with the best linen dress. She sang

at the ceremony and may people came not only to celebrate but to hear her sing. Her brother enchanted with his harp and the night was magical.

Eventually, however, change was to come. Arach had been prophetic to one change in particular. Two men came to the valley. They were robed in black and were to be called father. The people of the valley found this funny since they had no children. A strange new religion had taken root and spread through the land. It was said that this new religion said all people would be saved by this new god. Though from what they were being saved was never exactly clear in the tales about the newcomers. The robed men were said to disdain the world of fairy and all within it. They disputed its very existence as mere tales of country folk or worse, claimed such creatures were in league with demons and devils. They came, many of them, and built buildings where people gathered to pay homage to a god none could see but that the robed men insisted was there, was all powerful and must be obeyed or terrible punishments would follow.

The news came that, by order of the king, the people were to abandon the old ways and embrace the new. The robed men spoke of many things and told stories of a people and land far from their own. They spoke of a man, a god, who was also a king that had been put to death by the Romans who nailed him to wood to die. He was to have risen again from being dead and was now everywhere. It did not matter to the robed men that people seemed to find it strange that no one had seen him in their land nor did he speak their language. They only spoke of the need to obey and to change ways to be forgiven for their wickedness or die. There were many things these men said must be done to pacify this new god, his son, and his spirt where ever they might be for they always watched and recorded all things.

Now one of these robed men arrived from far away Essex on a pony with a cart. A second robed man came from Gwent and more amiable for he was at heart a Welshman. The first of these men was named Avery, which the villagers found very funny for his name meant ruler of the elves and yet this man did not acknowledge their existence but sneered at and condemned claims to their existence. He spared no chance in taunting the invisible creatures loudly in front of anyone who spoke of them, daring them to stand before the power of his god. Though many a good person believed in the creatures of fairy and had seen them or even spoken with them regularly, they were puzzled that challenge was never answered and began to wonder if these strange men might not be more powerful. When several of the village folk said to challenge this new unseen god in a like manner, the man called Avery became enraged and condemned the men for challenging this new deity.

The father from Gwent was an older man, rather plump, sported a shock of brown hair and a sweeping thick beard. He was no squat toad, however, but tall among people and immensely strong. His hands were enormous compared to most men and people remarked how he could split a log with one blow yet cradle a babe with a mother's touch. He had been a warrior at some point, it was said, and after losing an eye, he found insight in this strange unseen god. A long red scar from his temple, across a blind eye and down the cheek was his most prominent feature. He was named Aengus and was a joyous man who told great tales, could sing well, and knew how to talk with the local people. He laughed and drank with the village men and shared in their labors

for he understood what was important to them. He was wiser than his Eastern coreligionist and knew that to insult the fairy folk was to court trouble.

The creatures of fairy, for their part, were certainly aware of these funny looking men who shouted and flung insults at them. The creatures of fairy, however, thought the newcomers as rude wild men who did not know better than to say insulting things. The elves, nymphs and their other kindred wanted nothing to do with the boorish strangers though they occasionally played tricks on them and hid tools, shoes, and other things to annoy them. Occasionally they soured the wines or pinched the haunches of the donkeys they rode to make them buck and bounce to make the men uncomfortable and curse loudly. Often, these newcomers resorted to apply the rod to their beasts and loudly condemned them to the fire pit of their god. This offended both fairy and beast, but the beasts were the more unhappy.

Brigid and her kin had heard of these strange people and especially the one called Avery. They found him funny since he reminded them of a child's first attempt at making a doll out of dough. Waddling as he moved, he was a lump of pasty, white meal with arms and a round pebble for a head. He had bulging rolls for a neck, almost no hair and waved his sausage like fingers at people with an air of importance. His nose was the most prominent feature on his face and was a hooked beak above full red lips which he constantly licked amidst curious wheezing sounds he made. The villagers knew when he was coming for, he smelled thickly of lavender and black henbane he applied for aching joints. It was said that his servants drew him an herbal bath to sooth his milk-gray skin which itched against his robes. Overall, it was agreed among mortal and fairy that he was a most ugly and absurdly comical fellow to behold. Many thought him the victim of a curse or that he had offended his god in some terrible way and that he was paying the price for it. More than one villager felt sorry for the poor man and knew that his parents surely must have been dismayed at his appearance.

Father Avery built a church with many buildings, and went inviting the folk to church and told how they were in terrible peril. For all his ugliness, father Avery had a commanding, convincing and even magical voice. He alarmed the villagers in the valley when he told them that they needed be saved for they were sick to the bone with wickedness, even the babes and unborn. Unsaved, they would be cast to terrible pits of fire for all eternity. Naturally, the people were frightened and when asked how this came to be, they were told many stories. Father Avery gently re-assured them, however, that all they need do to avoid this terrible calamity was to be submerged with water and swear loyalty to the new god and obey him and his appointed ones in all things. For this god loved all his children, wanted only what was best for them and accordingly sent forth men to help protect them against evil. Father Avery explained that he and others like him would be shepherds to watch over his god's flocks. They would tell the people what to do and how to live so that they might remain worthy of the new and only god and not go to a place of punishment for all eternity. When the people asked where this terrible place was, the answer was less precise but that it must simply be taken as fact that it was there and the god he spoke of would find them and toss them in their as chaff if they refused to embrace him.

Now the people in Wales, like many places, tend to be practical folk and if someone tells them a terrible danger is coming, they will listen and see what it is about. If the solution is simple, say

paying a man to keep wolves away from the flocks, well, that makes sense. Doing what Father Avery said seemed a smart thing to for it seemed he was doing them a favor. They would not go to this terrible place since father Avery seemed to know all about it and would not have come all this way to tell them if it was not so. As it turns out, Father Avery said that this god needed payment too. So, they figured paying what was owed to keep out of this place made good sense and all they needed to do was agree to it, get a little water on their head, and go to hear stories about it one day a week.

But common, hardworking folk with good sense do not like too much change, especially if things have been going pretty well. The folk figured they had said what needed saying and were paying too and that should be protection enough. But Father Avery didn't see it that way. He said they must change all their ways, get rid of the superstitious beliefs, the wicked symbols and rituals or this new god would consider it an unforgivable insult and get mighty angry.

Father Avery was most alarmed by the symbols of a green dragon that was found in every home and in places about the countryside. He suspected pagan mischief and spoke mightily about false idols and worshiping fairies, who he constantly called evil spirits and demons. Dragons, he said, were the worst of the worst and wicked demons that served only a dark devil who lived in the fiery domain whom their nailed god had defeated in a pitched battle of good and evil. They would charm women into wanting to give their virtue to the evil ones, deliver children to be eaten by demons and dogs, and send illnesses and strife to all the households. All who worshiped this dragon, he said, were consorting with the devil and would die a horrible death in this life or the next. As such, he ordered all symbols be renounced and burned or they would be directly affronting this new god.

This greatly upset the people for they did not worship the dragon and they felt this was quite unfair. They respected him and honored his bargain. But Father Avery would permit no refusal, called the bargain nonsense, and went further by scolding them for the practice of delivering good sheep to feed a demon. They should, instead, deliver the intended sheep to the church as a gift and would in turn prosper. The dragon and all his ilk only sought to lure away good obedient souls to do the work of evil. A few, simple minded folk and more easily frightened quickly complied and begged in sorrow for forgiveness so much so that it exasperated even Father Avery.

When he saw that the people were still not obeying, father Avery spoke of a strange curse called excommunication which was evidentially a spell to drive people away and mark them as the devil's own. Such people would be outcast and no longer a part of the faithful and therefore of the people in the villages. Such people were to be reviled by all. Well, this didn't sit well with the people in the valley at all and they were afraid to protest when Father Avery came around one day and gathered all the tokens, figurines, carvings and totems the people had made and burned them. He reached to the skies and cried prayers in a strange tongue then left the people to ponder these things.

Creirwy went to Arach and told him of these things. He only sighed and said it was inevitable such men were to come. They were known across the world to the draig and to the fairy folk. It

was not simply these, but many others claiming many things. They had come to other places and raged a never-ending war on all creatures of fairy and the dragons and said the most terrible things possible.

Now it came to pass that Father Avery soon became a bishop in charge of many fathers or priests as they are also named. He built a granary, a great barn, and a new building for more priests in the nearby valley. He told the villagers far and wide that it was their duty to contribute to the church for the god had willed it for the good of all. As such, he sent men out to remind the people and collect both grain, wool, milk, cheese, and livestock that their God might be satisfied and this tithe come back to them tenfold. The villagers grumbled for when Arach had made a bargain, he replaced and multiplied over that which they gave. When the men of the Avery's church took it, there seemed to be no reciprocity in kind. They were, evidentially, to be grateful and happy with being saved from sin and death. As to the specifics of prosperity, that was never exactly explained.

The bishop's granary was always full, flocks great tended, and fine wool heaped in piles yet it never seemed to be enough. He would walk or ride about on a sad looking donkey and minister to the villagers telling great stories of their lord and the miracles he performed. He spoke of the devotion, obedience and duties that was expected of a women and frowned on many behaviors and traditions that for generations had made the people happy and content. All their prosperity, the wind, the rain and proper ordering of the seasons, the handsomeness of their children and health of their livestock were attributed to his god, or so he continuously claimed. This was a claim that puzzled the people since Arach already provided some of these things.

Bishop Avery delighted in singing and spared no effort to get Creirwy to sing to him but said it was not right for women to do so in his church. He loved learning and carefully selected promising young boys to study with the other robed men. He had young girls employed to perform needle work and other tasks in the kitchens and fields though he kept them apart from the men so that all could focus on work rather than be distracted by teasing and mischief.

One mid summers eve, the skies were flowing with waves of blue and green in the northern sky. Bishop Avery raised his hands and praised God for all the blessings the people had received for their faith and obedience. But one boy, listening, spoke up and reminded the bishop of the bargain with Arach and how he had only just delivered a sheep that very day since the number of sheep had continued to grow as Arach had always promised.

"That again!" growled Avery boxing the lad on the head, "You foolish boy! You left a perfectly good sheep in the woods for the wolves to feast upon. Next time leave yourself! There shall be no more talk of such nonsense and praise of this demon. Anyone who does shall face the wrath of the church. This town and valley are still in the grips of the evil one and god's anger will consume you all if you do not once and for all renounce such childish and wicked notions."

"Leave it be brother," said Aengus quietly and with a grin, "tis better not to offend the folk here for their traditions are old and not all you speak of is childish tales."

“Be silent Aegnus,” Avery snapped angrily looking up at the giant man, “I do not need you to speak for these simple people who cling to their pagan forebearers and abandon valuable sheep to the wilds. Whom do you serve? Me or they?”

“Neither,” laughed Aegnus, “I serve our beloved God and Christ. Whom do you serve brother?”

Avery’s face turned incandescent with rage at the rebuke and wit, “Do not trifle with me Aegnus. I know well enough you are of these people and were raised to believe such foolish tales as a child. I know they favor you because you are one of them, you work with them and drink with them. But here me! They require discipline and guidance, not indulgence. They will learn. I do not need your insolence to remind me of that.”

“That may be my bishop,” said Aegnus with his face turning serious, “but there are things in this land that you should not so easily dismiss. Even less should you undertake to insult. There are powers that lived and dwelt here long before you or I. There are things here that do not take kindly to offense. Even our Lord has his ways that are not always clear to mere mortal understanding.”

Avery snorted with disdain, “Fool! You are like an old granny who frightens children. I see you still embrace such tales as your forebearers. Perhaps you are not as devoted in faith as I thought. Perhaps you should be in a more wholesome place to cultivate the spirit of our lord within your breast.”

“Perhaps you should see reason and respect these people,” said Aegnus with no less conviction.

“We shall discuss your lapse in conviction later,” Avery muttered and waddled off in a huff.

It came upon a Sunday that bishop Avery called the people from villagers far and wide. There was to be a great feast to the lord and all were to be present.

“Christian souls of this valley,” he began. He wore a miter and had his pale arms upraised and had a glowing smile, “I have come to understand that many among you persist in your belief of creatures that dwell in the land that bring good and prosperity. This is false. You are being lured by servants of the devil and I know that it is through ignorance and the evil one’s dark sorcery that you are still held prisoner to his will. I have prayed unceasingly about this in devotion and love for your souls and was shown a vision by God on what I must do.

I have examined some of the children who speak of these creatures and especially one of the arch fiends named Arach, a dragon. Green as bile, monstrous and wicked is this thing who serves the evil one. He devours your sheep when God above multiplies them. He diverts your waters and poisons them when the love of heaven purifies them. He takes the flowers of beauty that are your children and seeks to subvert them to unnatural desires and gives over their precious souls to the ravenous fairy creatures you so adore to be sport for their hunger.

NO MORE. I have sinned grievously by allowing such evil to linger in this land too long. For that, I am to be blamed and condemned. But I shall no longer neglect my duties to you and our

God. This day, this hour this moment, I will go to him…to this demon Arach…an exorcise him from this land!"

A shout of dismay and anger went up with cries of alarm that prosperity would come to an end and life would be cursed for the offense. So great was the cry of alarm that the bishop was badly startled and taken aback at the degree of belief that persisted among them. Recovering quickly, he continued.

"You are mistaken my people," he said urgently, "you will see soon enough the wisdom and will of God. For even the sinner is blind until the darkness is torn away from his eyes. Follow me!"

With great speed and deliberation among a tumult of voices, he strode from the church and headed to the countryside. Past villages and pastures he marched with the great throng following with excited chatter. His chest rose and fell wheezing but with determination and a certain glow filled his face with righteous power. Dogs began to follow and soon the through made their way from one valley to the next to the riverside path all the way to the beautiful glade.

Indeed, the place was pure and wonderful he thought to himself but such was the garden of paradise that an evil serpent dwelt to snare Adam and Eve.

Father Aegnus was sweating and panting. He took a long drought from a waterskin and leaned to the bishop.

"Pray brother," he said quietly, "be content to lead them here and celebrate the beauty of the place. Give them a sermon about the wilderness, the beauty of creation, John the Baptist and Christ, but do not provoke what you do not understand."

"Be silent father Aegnus," the bishop retorted.

"Pray brother," warned Aegnus, "do not do this thing. You will regret it."

"I said be silent father Aegnus," hissed the bishop looking up at the bearish man, "Am I not your superior? Do you forget your place? This day will see the people cured of their folly."

Turning he raised his hands and the great throng went silent. Spinning about, he stared across the river to the beautiful lush eyot and shouted.

"Come forth Arach!" he boomed, "Come out worm! Face the one true and only God and his holy servant. We do not fear you nor are fooled by your falseness and evil gifts. These are Christian folk and protected by the one true Lord in heaven. They belong to him. You have no power here and I summon you forth to be banished from these fair lands! You cannot refuse my commands and must obey for I speak in the name of the Lord of all creation."

The crowd remained silent, watched, and held their breath. The waters ran by quickly and if they had but seen it, many fairy folk were in the trees watching with great interest to all the commotion.

After some minutes of silence and the occasional bird or insect, Bishop Avery spun around triumphant. "You see my foolish people," there is no dragon. If he is there, why does he not

come forth? Why does he hide in his own filth and shadow? Why indeed does he not answer when I, servant of God, commands him to come forth and give account of himself?"

"He does not come forth because he has already fled!" boomed father Avery, "Wickedness must flee before God and he has revealed his character now by having not the courage to face me, the servant of thee one true and only God!"

All listened and a soft murmur went up. Many heads were shaking and voices of confusion and uncertainty beginning to circulate.

"You are rude and lie," cried a voice.

Turning, red hot with anger at the insult, Bishop Avery spied Creirwy, the beautiful girl bristling with indignation. "Why indeed Bishop Avery," she retorted, "should he answer to you? You who address him in such a vile fashion when he has offered you no offense. He sought and obtained our friendship but you only bring insults."

"Be silent foolish girl," the bishop said with a hiss, "know your place. I know well enough the story of how you and your brother started this business. If there is any cause of misery to these good people it is you and your silly folk."

"Then you know how well we have prospered before you arrived," she said in bitter reply.

The bishop was nonplussed but grew anxious as the crowd began having murmurs of approval and nodding heads.

"I said be silent girl," he shouted and took several steps toward towards her, "Get thee behind me Satan. Go home now to your father's house and be silent woman for you offend God in your insolence. Do you not know it is for a woman to be silent? Perhaps you and your dear brother consort with the devil? Perhaps it is the evil one himself who taught you to sing and your brother to strum the harp to mislead others."

He began to raise his sweating sausage fingers to strike but suddenly a large cracking branch halted the bishop. The crowd gave a collective gasp and went silent pointing. Slowly turning around, he saw the trees shimmer and an enormous serpent glittering green with silver and gold sparkles come into sight. Stunned, he watched open mouthed in shock as the great dragon blinked at him and moved effortlessly. He spanned the entire river and came to rest before the bishop regarding him with amusement.

The bishop went deathly pale and swallowed hard, "Arach."

"I see you know my name Bishop Avery. I am well acquainted with yours," Arach said bowing slightly, "you have a peculiar way of offering hospitality and seeking friendship. You are not so kindly as the good people of the valley who bring naught but good will and friendship."

Bishop Avery's mouth went dry. He slowly began to panic and thought uncertainly what to do. Upon hearing the people start to agree with Arach, he quickly recovered. Reaching under his cassock he unfastened a pouch of salt that he carried everywhere to season his food.

“Begone evil demon!” he roared and threw the coarse salt into the large eyes only a few feet away. “Back to the pits of hell from which you came worm! I am a servant of God and will not bandy words with the black ones,” the bishop howled and tossed the rest of the contents into Arach’s face.

The crowd gasped in shock and Creirwy with her brother and little sister let out a cry of dismay. Though the people were too distracted to hear, a sudden wail of disbelief arose from the fairies watching in the forest. The whole forest shook with shock and anger. Arach reared back and bellowed in agony at the treachery. The trees shook from the roar, birds flew in all directions and animals scattered in terror. Falling backwards, Arach splashed into the river sending an enormous geyser in all directions, drenching the crowd, and sending the bishops miter spinning away.

“Begone foul thing, I banish you in the name of Christ!” roared the bishop holding his crucifix aloft and screaming Latin phrases. Arach thrashed in the water and disappeared. The glade fell silent and for many long minutes no one moved. The fairy folk fled in terror for never before had they seen such a spectacle or such disrespect. Who was this man who drove Arach into the waters to disappear?

“I have cleansed the land,” said the bishop shaking and out of breath, “be glad and give thanks to God for he is good. Life here will prosper anew and the souls of this land be protected from the evil ones. Go now in humble prayer and thanksgiving for a new day has dawned and the light of God shall smile upon you. Let us never again hear the name Arach or his evil spoken among God’s green earth.”

The crowd began to turn and go away back the way they had come but they were not joyful. Something had changed and they felt it immediately. The glade no longer seemed so wholesome, so pure, refreshing and soothing. The music in the air, subtle though it was, seemed to have vanished. Already a few were feeling sweat come to their brow from the heat that seemed to have started rising. No one gave thanks for all were deeply troubled and saddened.

The bishop, mystified by the mute response of the crowd continued to congratulate himself on his exorcism for now the people would turn from their childish ways and dangers to their souls to embrace the authority and power of God almighty. Yet, even as he searched for and finally found his miter, he glanced at the woods uncertainly. There was indeed a change yet something he could not place. The woods now seemed foreign and hostile and he felt as if many angry eyes, unseen, and glowering, were watching. He felt the gentle and good spirit that had greeted them all in this place was missing. He shuddered and hastened after the people. Something, he knew, had changed but not for the better.

At first the villagers everywhere were glum. Bishop Avery was perturbed by this lingering childish behavior but knew it must eventually give way to common sense. For several months the fields continued to grow. Sheep grazed, beer was brewed, bread was baked and life went on. But then, for the first time in many years, it grew hot, very hot. The rains did not come and the ground baked, the seedlings withered and sheep and goats searched for scrub. The milk cows yielded less and all tongues were parched.

Immediately, the voices went up against the bishop who, expecting such changes as part of the natural order, dismissed them and chastised them as being foolish since God ordained that there be times of plenty and times of lean. But then the rains came hard and endless. Mud became deep and the fertile soils could not be plowed. The river flooded its banks as never before and in several places livestock was swallowed up in the deep mires. Several villagers were also drowned or lost in the wilds and a stir that spoke of evil omens arose when, to the horror of everyone, the bones and bodies of the dead were washed out into the open. When the waters receded, they did so quickly and left countless fish to rot on the ground from the sun which came out almost immediately to scorch the ground again. The flies became swarms and such a summer could not be recalled from memory.

People began to go hungry, yet the bishop insisted that prayer, obedience, faith, and tithing (for his granary was never quite full) would see them through. He went about with his fellow priests and prayed incessantly and spoke of faith, endurance, and the need to purge all sin.

"I warned you bishop," said brother Aengus, "you were tampering with things about which you knew nothing and now have brought misery upon these people. You have insulted one of the great powers of the land in your own pride and caused the whole kingdom of fairy to rise up against us all."

"You foolish unbelieving man," said the bishop completely out of patience, "Your own faith fails you even now. The iniquity of the people has brought this pitiless state of affairs. No dragon controls the rains, the rivers, the land, and the trees. That creature, that worm from the pit, had no power over the growth and greenery of the world save that he perverted it to his own purposes and sought to harvest the souls of the ignorant. You speak as his defender. I wonder at your faith. Were it not for your connection to the people and work with the sick, I should have sent you away long ago. Do not continue to tempt me brother Aengus. Do not speak of such things again or you shall be sent to minister to the Picts in the North."

"You will do as you see fit bishop," brother Aegnus laughed mirthlessly, "you always have. See how the people suffer? We grow fat while they grow lean. We feed the flocks they have provided us with the grain that could sustain them."

"Then give them your bread and meat," said the bishop caustically, "you certainly won't starve anytime soon."

"No," Aegnus replied, "No I won't and neither will you. But it's one thing to belittle their traditions though, I confess, they are in error and their faith is weak. It's one thing to ask them to go without and tighten their belts and watch their children plead for food while we go with full bellies. But be warned bishop. I have also seen how your eyes follow some of the lasses."

At this the bishop whipped his head around sharply. He started to speak but brother Aegnus cut him short with a wave of his arm. "Do not bother denying it, it would be insulting," he said, "I was a warrior before accepting our savior and have known the habits of many men. Certain things are true of all men, their desires, their appetites, and their motivations. I'm no fool and you would be a fool to take me as such. A man's face and eyes easily betray him to others when

he thinks he appears blameless. Do not forget the dangers of lust my lord bishop. It would go ill for you indeed if you abused their trust in such matters. They will only put up with so much."

Brother Aegnus did not bother waiting for a reply but left the room. Indeed, bishop Avery realized to his frustration, he could make none. But in revenge, bishop Avery sent the good brother Aegnus his salvation by ordering him to the land of the Picts to save the pagans there. This was a most dangerous task.

Days passed to weeks, weeks into months and neither the weather or the mood of the people improved. Bishop Avery walked among the people and wrung his hands. He saw ribs sticking from the children's bellies, sunken cheeks and no amount of encouragement could move them. He saw only scrawny sheep and goats with families butchering them in desperation before they died for there was naught else to eat. Rabbits took to the hills and were not to be found while dogs and cats began watching their owners alternating between wary suspicion and hunger. Even the fish, which had not been killed in the overflowing river, seemed to have departed the waters. All except the occasional spiny Babel which left people groaning and clutching their bellies from its treacherous meat. Such were the trials of the people.

Yet, for all the obvious changes that seemed to point to some great sin that had not yet been defined or told, the bishop would not repent his own arrogance. He had taken to keeping within the walls of his church and seldom venturing out in the open. Instead, he sent young studying priests arrived from Wessex to move among the people. Faith, hard work, and obedience were the tools for their salvation.

On one particularly hot afternoon, the air was thick with a haze that felt like hot iron. Many months had gone with no rain and the ground was baked to stone. The afternoon heat blazed and nothing moved without great discomfort save the legions of flies. The bishop grumbled incessantly and mopped his forehead with a rag while watching the air shimmer. He knew something would have to change for the people no longer cared what he did or said and were beginning to turn their anger at him.

Saturday, he had told them he had prayed day and night for rain and experienced a vision of a cleansing rain that would relieve the heat and return the land to prosperity. He told them their iniquity from worshiping idols and evil beings had been so great that the lord almighty had been ill disposed to simply forget their iniquity for it was indeed deep and offensive. Only through his direct appeals to God had brought change, though in truth the had spent hours reading the signs and asking distant old men about the weather and when rains might come.

He had taken a desperate gamble during his homily and told them that he thought God had relented his anger and would no longer burn and curse the land but show them the brighter way through prosperity. He would wash away the hurts and refill the cows with sweet milk, cover the fields with tender shoots and let the goats and sheep multiply and produce. Great would be the fish that would return to the water and the sun flames would slake the lands begging for relief.

The following night, he had seen a halo around the moon and sighed with relief. Usually, that meant rain was coming. So, on this day, more oppressively hot than anything to date, he was

well pleased to see clouds forming up. Gradually they built and the beginning tendrils of cool breezes caressed his brow. He signed with relief and crossed himself knowing that the people, who missed no sign from nature, would sense the changes too.

The clouds continued to build and, not missing the chance to make good on this change in fortune, he obtained his donkey and quickly set out to ride among the people. They tipped their hats to him as he passed. Whereas previously it had been in contempt and scorn it was now in gratitude and relief. He rode far and wide in the valley that afternoon as the clouds built. He was some distance away from his church observing flocks of sheep on a hillside when the first distant thunder began to rumble.

Creirwy and Pryderi noticed it too and were relieved. Quickly, they left the valley and went, as they frequently did, back to the glade to see if Arach had returned. But the clouds to the North and West grew mighty and dark. As they plucked plums from the trees, which were now sparse and unsatisfying, they grew alarmed at the sudden cold air blowing fiercely. The trees began to sway and leaves wailed in distress as the invisible fingers sought to rip them from the branches. Despite their calls, Arach made no answer but as the wind grew a figure darted from the trees. It was a nymph from the fair folk, anxious and excited. She appeared to be no more than a child but there was a glow about her pale form and thin fluttering clothes that told of her nature.

"Quickly friends Creirwy and Pryderi," she said hurriedly, "why are you here? Do you not see the clouds on the mountains? They are all of woe and wrath! Why do you seek Arach when he has gone?"

Pryderi spoke first, "Who are you little one? Have you lost your way? Where is your mother? We fear the storm coming and hoped to find our friend Arach back."

"Nay Child!" said the nymph, "I am called Anwyl and this is my home you stand in. I am friend to Brigid. I bid you follow me in all haste. I am no child though as one I must appear to your eyes. Even now we may be too late. For it is because Arach has departed for Ireland that the black clouds have gathered. The giants to the north have gathered with the wicked race of black dwarves and beat the ground with thunder, wind, and lightning now that he is gone! They come too with sorcery. Too long has the noble Arach kept them at bay and they are wroth! They are coming and shall bring thunderbolts and push the winds over the land. Great rains have they summoned from their kin in the great seas to the north and they shall make war on the land even where we stand! Fly with me quickly. Though you are slow pokes, I shall lead you on to safety if I can. Speak no more for there is no time! Behold!"

Anwyl pointed to the north and the children's mouths dropped. A terrifying wall of water, still distant rolled over the mountain tops with clouds of fingers rolling over each other as claws. Forked lightning shot across the skies and the thunder echoed and boomed. Such a sight they had never seen or thought possible.

"Quickly now," the little figure urged and darted into the woods, golden brown hair flying. For a nymph at home in her own woods, the going was indeed quick. So Nimble, lithe, and quick were fairies like Anwyl that they could leap under the tangled branches and vines with the ease of an

afternoon breeze. Not so for the brother and sister. They pushed and darted as best they could around tree and brush. They leaped and twisted and pulled free of clawing vines that now seemed to almost laugh at them as they fought to keep up.

The breeze grew even colder and whipped through the tangle of oaks and chestnuts. The skies were darkening so fast that under the tree it became as twilight and then dark. Lightning shattered the skies and the following thunder was louder and deeper than any they had ever heard. Sounds of great branches snapping in the wind boomed through the forest.

“Truly are they angry!” shouted Pryderi, “for such noise must surely mean the earth is ripping itself apart.”

Anwyl’s fair skin glowed in the hostile dark and raging wind. So cold became the wind that their breath created clouds and noses grew red from chill. On they raced until Anwyl could no longer be seen. The children paused amidst claps of thunder and saw terrified wolves and deer race by them paying no heed to their mortal enemies.

“Quickly, Quickly foolish youth!” said Anwyl reappearing to the left, “No time for watching others. They too race from the hammers of the storm giants and drums of the dwarves. Quickly.”

Creirwy and Pryderi looked at the little creature and stared blankly.

“Why do you wait?” she said annoyed, “Do you not know doom is close? Follow me.”

“Where?” shouted Pryderi, “We see nowhere to go but trees and brush.”

Anwyl raced over looking bewildered. How could mortals, being such dolts, survive in this world if they knew not how to get out of the rain. Anwyl gasped as she looked past them. All three heard a new sound.

“Doom” “Boom” “Doom” “Boom” “Crack” “Split” “Crash” “Boom”

There was the sound of splitting trees. The earth shook and the brother and sister were thrown to the ground while not even the nymph was Anwyl quick enough to escape the shaking. Anwyl went spinning away into a bush.

It was a chant from fell voices on top of the thunder and it was terrible as it shook the trees and earth.

Anwyl emerged from her undignified toss with a look of anger then fear. Quickly, she grabbed both their hands and pulled them around a giant chestnut tree that stood next to them.

“In we go!” Anwyl shouted. Without protest, they were pulled inside and immediately began falling. They fell through tendril and root, twig and leaf, burrow and tunnel until landing in a pile of leaves so deep they could not see their way out. Outside above, the rains began as a maelstrom on land.

The bishop too had seen it was time to head back but as the skies had grown dark, his smile began to fade. His faith was replaced by fear and the sound of the unearthly march of an angry

storm was terrifying. Farmers and their families ran everywhere trying to get the remains of their famished livestock into shelter. Birds began to spin out of control on winds that swept great clouds of blinding dust and leaves across the blistered landscape. As the temperature dropped, his fear mounted and he spurred the donkey on for there was still nearly a mile to go before the protective stone walls of his church and granary. The donkey, already weary from its heavy burden, labored on. Lightning speared the sky and several nearby trees erupted in a sudden, deafening crack of death. The donkey shrieked in terror and bucked the bishop off before bolting towards the safety of the church stable.

Thrown ignominiously to the ground, the bishop struggled to his feet in a fit of rage. Immediately, he howled after the disappearing beast and excommunicated it on the spot. Hastening on, his broad slouch hat was snatched away and carried off many furlongs before vanishing into the trees. Then he heard the noise as the skies went from twilight to dark:

"Doom" "Boom" "Doom" "Boom" "Crack" "Split" "Crash" "Boom."

He squinted into the dust and lightning and saw streamers of clouds like claws raking over the trees in at the rim of the distant valley and walls of rain behind them. He saw giant figures of shadow in the sky swinging great mattocks from side to side and thumping the ground while rows of gnarled black dwarves in the sky with glittering yellow eyes and red tongues beating great drums. Treetops began to break up in the distance and he saw twirling clouds set loose by great hooded sorcerers in the sky that began to bite and gnaw the land, pitching everything they touched great distances

In a panic, the fat clergyman began running towards his distant refuge. Wheezing and gasping from exertion and dust, he grunted and moaned against the increasing weather. He began muttering prayers as he stumbled from side to side shielding his eyes while his robes were whipped about his face and head slowing his progress.

The rains suddenly swallowed up the distant trees. Like a wall of night, it swept over him in torrents blowing him down and rolling him many feet until he was thrown in an undignified heap in a ditch and knocked senseless for a time.

When he came around, the giants, the dwarves and the sorcerers had moved far away but could still be heard. Distant and rumbling their cacophony could be heard but it was heading south. He stood and found that he suffered no injuries save a lump on the head, several scratches and bruises and robe torn to mere wet rags. His dignity and pride, however, were mauled beyond reckoning. He was mostly naked and resembled a pasty white lump of dough poorly rolled in gravy and thrown to the ground.

"My lord bishop!" shouted two of his local young boy acolytes as they ran across the field, "we feared the worst! Praise God that you have been spared. Never has such a storm struck this valley in all the years of my life, my father and his. The valley folk say it was said that Arach that kept these monsters away. Now the terrors of the north have returned. Gods' mercy upon us all my lord, let him send the angels to defend us for our need is great. The iniquity of the valley must indeed be great!"

The bedraggled bishop said nothing but swallowed his humiliation and let himself be guided back to the church.

And there he stayed. Though the initial terror had passed, it rained all day. It rained all day the next, and the next. It rained unceasingly for a solid week such that the people began to fear the world was to be flooded anew. The rivers did indeed spread and cover fields and in some places came up to the very thresholds of homes, the mud was deep and even old trees sagged in the waterlogged soil. Children dared not go out since one poor sow had been swallowed up in her stye and on the road a cart had to be abandoned for sinking up to its belly.

The village folk now knew not what to believe. Arach had left and before him all had been peace and balance. But the bishop said their iniquity had been great and that the rains would cleans the land. But the rains would not stop. Some went to the church and pleaded for advice but the bishop only bade them to keep praying, as he was doing, and that the storms would lift once God had washed their sin from the land. Along midway of the second week, a great crash was heard at the church and the granary collapsed on its side from a foundation not designed to be supported on deep mud.

The rats and mice, also starving from having run out of stranded fish, dead livestock, and the odd grave, raced to the mountains of grain from their hiding places. The clergy tried to save what grain they could, but in the continuing but sporadic rains it quickly became ruined. The bishop ordered his laymen into the weather to shovel what remained of the precious food into the barns for the livestock. All manner of creature ate and they were mightily pleased at their good fortune and The bishop could only look in dismay and his belly grumble though he still had many barrels of mead and wine.

For the villagers in the valley, somehow in the worst conditions, strong drink could be had. A disaster might come, but it was indeed a true disaster when the last cask of beer or mead ran dry. The people of Wales, being a prudent and industrious lot, always kept a tiny bit back for emergencies. When the granary collapsed, word spread and families met to sip what remained and ponder what such a calamity might mean that even the bishop had been punished by his God. Meanwhile, it continued to rain and some, fearing the consequence took to watching the river up and downstream to see what dangers might result for it was feared that the mischief from the north might not yet be at an end.

On the day of the calamitous storm, Creirwy and her brother were delighted to discover they had fallen into a place unlike any they had seen. Anwyl laughed and sang a silly rhyme as she pulled dry leaves of gold and silver from their faces:

“Up up you silly wooly heads,
Goldy fallen leaf is not to be your bed!
No stormy storms, here all is safe and warm
Away from rainy rain and nasty prickly thorn.
Up up, come quickly drink and eat,
Quickly darlings be now quick and fleet.”

She was an enchanting fairy maiden with a sweet but strong voice that belied her child-like size and seemed to light up the tunnel with each word of her tune.

“Not down here can the hammers and the drums reach!” She laughed, “Not here do the rains wash away the pretty flowers and leave the fishes on the shore…poor fishes.”

She dashed away in the dark tunnel leaving streamers of flashing stars behind her. Soon they found themselves in a tunnel deep under the ground but, unlike a rabbit burrow or den of a bear, they stood and walked. There were roots that grew in neat ordered rows upon the walls while among countless tendrils, silver lamps hung spreading their gay light upon the ground. On they went and the roots became thicker and smooth as polished wood. Quite suddenly the passage came to an end and, at Anwyl’s touch, the roots groaned and moaned then began to part for them to pass. A golden light spilled through the widening crack and soon there was a place of tremendous size, bigger than the whole of many villages put together. The roof was high and the land stretched away to distant walls.

“This way!” said Anwyl eagerly and she led them down a white round pebble strewn path amidst rolling hills of grass.

“How,” Creirwy exclaimed, “How do you get the grass to grow underground? How are there trees and birds and sheep and goats?”

“There are ponds and fountains too,” said Pryderi, “I see over there, a lake that glitters and fish that jump.”

“Aye they do!” said, “Many a fair size they are and they are full of mischief if you do not pay attention. They shall wink at you and as you lean to look close, spit water in your face. Most rude! But its all-in good fun. They come and go with the river through passages known only to them. Their cousins that swim above, they say with disgust, are the stupid folk for they let themselves be caught and eaten with silly hooks and bait. They are right of course! For only a lazy blockhead would take an easy meal on a shiny hook when there are plump juicy things right in the water! The Goblins love these smart fish and try mightily to catch them.”

The radiant nymph rolled back in laughter at her own observation while the two children looked dubiously at each other.

The little creature flitted this way and that and showed them silver lamps with crystal that sparkled at night and gold ones with warm topaz that warmed to day in the cavern. There was no sky, of course, in the cavern, but as the lamps changed from day to night. They saw tiny little glow worms came out in the roof and formed a beautify canopy of starlight that cast a silver light over the landscape.

There they stayed. Anwyl took them to the court of the king to be examined for she had been sent to bring them to safety. Brigid shouted with joy at their arrival and embraced them both with many kisses. Many gentle and eager faces gathered to see the youthful brother and sister. The king and queen, being well pleased with their excellent manners and courtesy, granted them

leave to remain to avoid the hammers and the drums of the storms above. The court listened to the plight of the people and, knowing well the cause of the distress and discomfort of the neighboring valley, shared their dismay. They understood that the sun beat too hard and wilted the seedlings while the rains made the hoof and foot sink deep. They looked on with distress at the suffering of the wooly sheep and stubborn goat. They wept at the misery of the fleet footed forest animals, the birds, the fishes and the faded fair flowers from which the fair folk wove garlands and crowns. Having heard the accounts of Creirwy and Pryderi and knowing the people sorely repented the presence of the robed men they considered what to do.

The threats of terrible punishment and ill manners of the one called Avery had frightened the villager people. They remembered the insults to Arach, the mean trick with salt and the insults to their kindred. Though loathe to become wrathful and not a warlike people, the king and the fairies clamored for action and they gathered to consider what might be done.

Meanwhile, the brother and sister were to be guests. The nymphs, at Brigid's direction, gathered round and gave them fair garments to wear. Flowers, fragrant and colorful, were woven into Creirwy's golden hair and in a gown of moonlight. Pryderi was adorned with a crown of white and blue flowers to wear and a tunic of deep blue with a belt of silver set with crystals to gird his waist. There were songs and tales, poems and music, feasting and drinking. For many days the siblings sojourned, honored guests of the fairy folk.

Now it came to pass that a fairy named Brinjal, one of the Seely Court folk in what is now Scotland, had only just arrived to see his cousins in the caverns. He passed through the valley at precisely the worst time or best time depending on how one looks at it. Fearing the wrath of the storm and march of the giants, he hid among the sheep in a barn. There he remained and listened to the lamentations of the skinny sad animals that were clustered inside. For it is known that the fairy folk have special kindred and love of animals and can speak with them.

He grew wroth and wept at their loss of ewes and kids, calves and hatchlings for their suffering had been pitiful and needless. They angrily pointed out bishop Avery when he passed by as the storm struck. Watching intently, Brinjal saw the unhappy donkey that breathed heavily laboring under the fat burden on his bowed back.

Smiling with mischief, he cried out to the donkey in his own tongue to cast off the bulky bishop and flee with all haste to the barn. For Brinjal told the beast that lest he flee, he would surely be gobbled up by the storm giants. As it happened, Brinjal's warning came right before the thunderclap. The poor beast thought the thunder clap and exploding tree was a narrow escape from the storm giant's iron spit to catch him and roast him over a fire. Not wasting a moment, he promptly and gladly threw the corpulent bishop from his back and fled. As this all transpired, Brinjal laughed merrily with the barn animals as the bishop tumbled into the mud, arms and legs flailing, and rolled out of view.

Now once the march of the wrathful storm giants and wicked black dwarves had passed, Brinjal immediately sought out his kindred among the king and queen and reported all he had seen. The King and court were delighted at the trick done too the bishop for it was a good deed. But it was agreed at once that something must be done to drive out this irksome man and hasten Arach's

return. The king consulted his queen and they agreed upon a tricksy plan. Forthwith she ordered two of her most skilled courtiers to go to Ireland in an appeal to Arach, explain all that had happened and what was to be done ere he returned.

The queen insisted that Creirwy and her dear brother remain for a while for it was growing frightfully dangerous outside. The rains continued, flooding becoming more treacherous and the mud growing deeper. The river was swollen far over its banks, covered the fields and in places lapped at the very eves of homes. Such misfortune would not reach this secret realm, but it was readily agreed that it was too dangerous for their guests to wander home.

Finally, after weeks, the rains ceased. The clouds refused to leave and let the sun dry the land. The bishop, eager to replace his lost granary and its precious contents, sent messengers to summon the men as laborers to rebuild and restock the granary. There was nothing to be had from people who had next to nothing yet he sent his servants out regardless. This command however, could not be done for the mud was deep and treacherous and the donkeys and ponies that tried to carry the heralds from the church sank to their bellies and had to be continually pulled out with many men. The bishop grew wroth for his stomach growled and he missed the company of several lasses with whom he had taken a fancy to in order to work in his kitchen, that had mainly empty larders, and work in his halls. He loved the pretty little girls and boys and it brought him great joy to see them with their golden hair flowing and blue eyes sparkling in the light as they brought him his meals of soup and sang. They would flit like flower blossoms and he made them sing as larks to brighten his heart. Such beauty and little angels, he thought, were fitting to serve the church.

At last, Creirwy and her brother returned and there was much celebration since they were assumed lost to the wrath of the storm. They were not lean, but strong and shone with a radiance and happiness. The bishop, called them forth to be examined for he much marveled at their good health and desired to know how they had escaped the disasters that had fallen upon the valley. The pair winked at each other and said that they had found shelter with the fairy folk and been rescued from the very hammers of the giants. There they had danced and even now wore the fine clothes in their hair they had been given. She sang for the Bishop and Pryderi played the harp, for the nymphs had taught him how to make marvelous sounds with the instrument. The servants of the church stopped to listen in wonder at the pair and it was soon whispered that the Arach had perhaps forgiven the people for the bishop's insult.

The bishop, however, was having none of it, exceedingly angry and dismissed them immediately. He charged them as liars and spreading falsehoods to lead people away from God and his church. He accused them of consorting with evil spirits to bring misery on the people. He warned them, and indeed all the servants, to say nothing of this to the people, even their own kin lest they be immediately excommunicated and cast from the village.

The bishop, however, to be certain that no credence be given to their tale, spread the rumor that the pair had gone to make a pact with the evil one and abandoned the plight of their own people. If all the valley and surrounding lands were so destitute and hungry, how else could this treacherous brother and sister come back so plump save from the very banquet of the devil. This

did not bother the brother and sister for indeed they had been warned by the fairy folk to expect that the bishop would not welcome them and seek to get revenge for making him look foolish. Smiling they left the bishop which served only to make him sorely bitter and angry at their insolence and lack of fear.

The clouds did not clear but it rained yet again and the mud grew deep. Soon a nymph came to Creirwy at her home and whispered to her ear as the others slept.

"It is time!" Brigid said with great delight and both giggled with expectation. Anwyl danced about Creirwy's baby sister to the immense delight of the child. It was announced the day after that a stranger had arrived to seek the hand of a certain maiden. He was a fair youth with a full flowing hair of brown hair and sparkling eyes. His features were fine and body lithe and strong. He sang and was reckoned to be a bard but announced he was simply the son of a prosperous farmer who had met Pryderi and Creirwy on the road and proclaimed his love for a certain beautiful maiden in the valley. Taking the smitten young man into their care, they insisted that he take lodging in their home while he met the bishop and arrange for the wedding of his beloved.

The bishop, delighted for a diversion, was most impressed with the man, his manners and handsome youth. He eagerly agreed to marry the two once he had met them both. He was, however displeased to find the lad was with the family of Creirwy.

A man, the girl's father, whom nobody had ever met, brought forth his daughter to Bishop Avery and paid his respects and made the necessary arrangements. He introduced his daughter, a young girl of 17 whom none had ever seen yet all acclaimed the most radiant of young girls. She was gentle in demeanor, modest, could sew the most beautiful stitch and calm the most ill-tempered of children with her voice. From those who tasted her broth or baked bread, none could ever claim having a better fair. As custom dictated, she was lodged in a home where respectable people would serve as guardians given her parents had died in the recent troubles of heat and storm. Where exactly the pair had come from, no one could rightly say but so charming were they, that it seemed not to matter.

Now the parents of Creirwy suspected the youth was not all he seemed and soon were let in on the plan. With great fanfare, they celebrated the pending marriage of the pair and vouched for the young man being a distant relative who sought the bishop to join them. He examined the youths and was moved by their marvelous appearance and melodious voices.

Bishop Avery threw himself into the preparations knowing this was a way to improve the spirits of the people. He quickly began preparing his own part in the ceremony and posted the betrothal on the doorpost for all to see.

Some days before the union, he sent first for the groom, then to the bride. In each private meeting, he would instruct them to the duties expected of a wife and husband, temporal and spiritual, so that they might have a harmonious life within the church. When, however, he sent for the young girl, he felt only a burning desire in his heart when he saw her for, she now seemed more like an angel than a mere girl.

Now fairy wine is especially tasty and, if consumed with joy and with pure heart, brings about song, stories and good cheer. If, however, the heart is black, the wine is especially strong and leaves one with a headache worse than a mule kick to the head. One of the nymphs came to the bishop's residence disguised as a rather ugly old woman. She bore a special ewer of wine to the bishop in a beautiful polished silver and gem inlaid vessel. She also brought sweet cakes drenched with honey for the celebration. Finding the unfamiliar woman repugnant to behold, he thanked her curtly and dismissed her with a blessing. He greatly marveled at it and though puzzled at the sender, did not need much persuading to set the bewilderment aside for the ewer would make a fine addition to the church plate collection. Outside, it had started raining again in great amounts.

The rains set the bishop in a foul mood and seeking something more pleasant, he sniffed the contents of the ewer. His eyes rolled in delight and he could not help but take a small sip and declared it the finest wine he had ever tasted. Unable to help himself, he took a cup and poured a larger measure and began to eat one of the cakes. Soon he had consumed two cups and was giddy with delight. He poured yet another and continued to eat the cakes.

Now this ewer was special since it could never be fully emptied but replenished itself. Quickly, the bishop forgot how much he had consumed but he was always grateful the cup could be refilled. The cakes were of fairy make but had an added a special root, popular with wild pigs, to make his belly unsettled.

No mater, he thought, such fantastic gifts were not to be questioned and surely a sign of good things to come for only God sent miracle could provide an unending flow of such fine wine. After all, why not? Did not Christ himself make wine from water for the wedding feast? Did not Christ feed the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread and fish? He drank yet another and soon, to the shock of his staff, he was slapping his knees in merriment, quoting the gospels and singing hymns of praise. He had consumed all the cakes that were for the celebration and had crumbs and honey on the sides of his mouth.

A servant then entered, looked in shock at the intemperate giddy bishop, then quickly announced that the young bride had arrived.

"Show her in at once!" replied the bishop with an exaggerated flourish of his hand and a jolly laugh, "Let not the beautiful bride be kept from God's servant. Indeed, I shall welcome the company of so fine an angel for I have much I need to discuss with her and hear her confession." Suddenly the bishop broke wind so loud that he and the servant jumped in surprise.

The shaken servant began to speak but the bishop would breach no comment and sent him away. The bishop, however, was unaware how much he tottered about and sweated on his balding pasty white head, rolling jowls and fleshy neck. His lips, constantly dry, he licked out of habit and the eyes roamed the room as if seeking something he was supposed to remember. As he moved about, he again shook with the sudden blast of flatulence that shook him to the bone.

The young girl strode into the room radiant and glorious in a white linen dress woven with yellow and blue flowers and a silver belt of glittering crystal. A gossamer shawl wrapped about

her head and sparkled with silver and white blossoms. The servant wrinkled his nose at the fouled air and went pale. He was embarrassed for his master and tried quickly to straighten the bishop's kinked garments. But this only irritated the bishop and he swatted away the well-meaning servant's hands and ordered him out. He further barked at the man to leave the window shutter alone as the poor man tried to open it for fresh air. The beautiful maiden put her hand to her mouth and giggled. This action delighted the bishop, thinking he had amused the girl in his coarseness, and made him bolder in his attitude.

"Come sweet angel," he said triumphantly if unsteadily, "come forth and let me look at you for you are indeed the fairest of all these simple folk of the valley."

The servant, red faced with embarrassment, crossed himself and hurriedly left the room.

The girl, still smiling took off her shawl to expose golden braided hair with honeysuckle. The bishop's eyes widened as his eyes looked her up and down at the fine delicate form and depthless sparkling eyes which shone with a radiance and held his gaze. She had a sash of sparkling silver about her waist and a garland of flowers about her neck which fell as a rainbow over her bosom. Never in all his years had he beheld such a vision of perfection, youth and beauty. Suddenly, he felt the demand of nature to release another thunderclap from his gut and he struggled to suppress it. He began to sweat with the effort.

In a somewhat awkward attempt to assert authority, he commanded her forth.

"Come child," he said drunkenly, "I must examine you closely for our Lord does not lightly join people. It is meet and customary to confess your sins before God in such a solemn occasion and I, being his devoted servant, am the one that shall guide your soul to a righteous place."

Her cheeks turned red and she looked away embarrassed.

"Come now," he said patting a chair, "sit here. All are sinners before God and you need not be ashamed or embarrassed. For you are young and comely. Surely a girl fair as you have very little to confess for the weariness of the years and sinning is not yet upon you. Tell me thy sins, confess with sincere repentance and I shall give you absolution, for such is the solemn and sacred duty of the Lord's servant. You need have no fear of the lord, for he is forgiving to those who obey his commandments and confess their sins."

Silently she came forward slowly. Each step made the bishop ache with desire as she moved. Never had he been so moved by beauty and desire. He finished his cup and put it down and in doing so missed the table and sent it clattering to the floor. He barely noticed. For a moment, he considered giving the young lass a measure of the splendid wine and thought, perhaps, he might do so in a private eucharist. "Yes," he thought, "such a body must be cleansed with the body and blood of the lord, though that shall come soon enough."

She sat down meekly and he moved to the front sitting in a chair opposite. Licking his dry lips, he took her delicate small hands in his sausage fingers and smiled. He could not stop it and the long roll of erupted from the bishop. The bishop wrinkled his own nose at the release and grew embarrassed. "Too many sweet cakes," he said weekly, "they are indeed too rich for my body.

It would seem I am rewarded for my sinful enjoyment of cakes. You see, even we men of God have our frailties."

The young maiden said nothing but her lips to suppress her smile. The bishop began to squirm uncomfortably as the pressure quickly began to build in even greater amounts.

"Those peasants and farmers," he grumbled softly, "I'll warrant they have made those cakes with chaff and soured sheep's milk."

"What my lord bishop?" inquired the maiden.

Realizing she though he was talking to her, he waived his hand dismissively, "Nothing my dear. My digestion suffers greatly this night. Now then," he said, "let us be frank with one another. What sins have you done? What sins of the flesh? What sins of desire? What sins of…" he paused and checked himself realizing the blushing of the girl.

Boldly, he leaned forward and put his hands on her thighs which caused him to release a shockingly loud bout of gas. Closing his eyes in embarrassment and and sweat, he cursed inwardly continued in a wavering and struggling voice, "What I mean to say child is what bad things have you done in thought or deed? For in confessing such things, we free ourselves of terrible burdens and become pure in spirit at giving over ourselves to God from the sins we carry with us."

He leaned closer clenching all his muscles in the effort to stifle yet another explosion, "I can tell you are shy my dear and it is no crime to be so for in shyness we find humility and such is a virtue of women that is to be well regarded."

She looked up at him, "Father, truly have I found a voice for my own faults in you. You read my heart as a book thrown open to the light. Long have I wished to relieve my burden to a man of God but knew not how to do it. I wish only to be a good wife and obedient to the service of him and God. I fear my sin is great and I must do penance for your God shall surely not forgive me."

The bishop looked startled and concerned, clenching her thighs, "Pray say not such things my child. Speak thy sin and all shall be forgiven for there is no iniquity that the God may not overcome. What sin have you done for I shall not be your judge?"

"It is you good bishop," she said, "I seek a strong man of God such as you to drive the devil from me and I fear that I should bring naught but ruin to my husband to be if the devil dwells within my heart. How shall I be rid of him for I know he lies within."

The bishop could hardly believe his ears and his heart raced with alarm and delight, "Truly girl, to be possessed by the devil is the gravest of sins and shall bring ruin to you and damnation. There are ways to cure this though they require much, yet all may be done now and none may know of your sin. I shall be indeed a humble servant to cleans you and drive him from your body."

The bishop rose and with trembling hands bid the girl rise. Another prolonged explosion of gas erupted from the man. Ignoring his own embarrassing predicament, he thought to himself, 'Such

pale skin, such hair and such form.' Her voice was musical and he could see her eyes imploring him to release the devil from within.

He snuffed out several candles, "This is a solemn ceremony and we need not give the devil sight of your fair form for he will resist expulsion from the sword of righteousness."

"Sword my lord bishop!" she said in alarm.

"Fear not child," he said reassuringly, "tis not of iron that the sword of righteousness is made. Iron is for the infidel and for the enemies of God, but the devil is not subject to iron."

He came over and then put his hand upon her waist, "Now then, we must be rid of anything the devil might cling to. This is a solemn moment and dangerous for your spirit if you do not follow my instruction exactly. Let us remove the things he might cling to as cast him out."

As the wine of the ewer sank deeper, he suddenly belched with shattering force. "Wine so pure and cakes so divine must also be the devil's own fare," he muttered, "I'll warrant that old hag put some root in the wine to cause me grief." He began to tug at her dress.

"My lord bishop!" said the girl alarmed, "surely you do not wish me to disrobe?"

"Pray, be patient child," he said firmly, "for it is obedience to God that shall free you from this devil."

He pulled harder and the girl squealed and wheeled away in alarm with a smile. "My lord bishop," she said teasingly, "I think you do but mock my sin and affliction! Surely no man of God would so tease a maiden to banish sin by simply casting aside her earthly garments."

"No indeed," said the bishop, "but it is only through exposing the devil and driving him out that you may be forgiven, for the task requires much and I shall thrust him out of you!"

He began to reach for her again, but she darted and laughed. She spun about sending her hair in a twirl of sparkling gold in the pale light. "Truly," she continued, "Truly my lord bishop, the devil speaks and says he will not easily be driven forth save by only the most holy of men."

Growing ever more frustrated, the bishop lunged and reached but could not seem to grasp this nimble girl who so easily flitted about and made his heart ache and burn. With each effort he broke wind and belched loudly but did not seem to notice or care. His spiritual mission was aroused to a frenzy.

"Be still child!" he said angrily and stumbling over a chair, "for indeed the devil is strong with you."

"Nay lord bishop," she mocked gaily, "the devil bids me to say farewell and that you shall not purge him from my body this night."

With a teasing spin she raced out the door.

With a cry of dismay, the bishop raced after her tumbling in his own corpulence over a chair in the progress.

“My lord,” cried a servant, “what has happened?”

“I am about the Lord’s work,” he cried angrily and shoving the bewildered man aside, “get thee to bed and trouble me not till this child is purged of the evil one.”

She never ceased to let him out of her sight but drew him on. Out into the courtyard they raced, she like a flitting wisp and he lumbering heavily after beating the walls with the loud barking coughs of his bowels and belly.

“But my lord,” cried one of the servants who staggered back with the passing scent of the bishop.

He did not acknowledge the man but stumbled on waiving him off.

She seemed to float above the ground in glittering pirouettes, never once sinking in the mud as he did.
“Come back temptress,” he bellowed, “thou art lost if the devil is not purged. I shall not let him gain dominion over so fair a maiden as thee.”

He chased her about causing the donkeys and skulking dog to gaze in wonder at the bishop waddling about in the rain that had begun anew. At length he caught up to her and lunged at her. He lay hold of her silver belt and it slipped free as she flitted over the stone fence into the adjoining field.

“Wait!” he cried clutching the belt and plunged forward.

As he stumbled over, his robe caught and was ripped asunder and from his body. He struck his chin on a rock and bit his tongue. In a howl of rage and pain, he plunged into the deep mud. Onward she ran, seeming to glow in the very night while dancing and laughing gaily as a distracted child never sinking into the mire.

The bishop flopped over and wallowed in the muck up to his elbows as he tried to get on his feet. He was covered head to toe and only the whites of his eyes betrayed he was there. Angrily he sluffed off the rags of his robe not even realizing the muddy earth was his only garment.

“There he is,” rose a cry from behind, “the demon!”

A gathering of villagers had converged on the church grounds having heard that a demon had arrived to spirit away the bride. The demon was the one responsible for the misfortune. By the light of the torches, Creirwy and Pryderi led the people forth.

“Look!” Pryderi gasped in shock and dismay. A collective gasp rose from the crowd.

The bishop turned about and saw a gathering of people approaching and flicked his tongue out which gushed blood from the unfortunate bite. “Perchance we are too late,” shouted Creirwy, “he has already laid hands upon her for there is her silver belt in his hands. See his long red tongue licking at us. His blackened skin is surely a sign he has been sent from hell. See how vile he is! The stink of open graves! Shameless creature! Naked in his blackened devil’s hide to snare the bride and spirit her away to be the plaything of wicked folk.”

At that moment the bishop let fly another barking cough from his posterior and as he opened his mouth to speak belched loudly.

“The foul thing mocks us!” shouted a villager.

“No you fool,” said another, “don’t ye know a demon’s curse when you hear it? Tis not of words they speak with.”

“What manner of blade is it the foul thing carries,” said an old man squinting in the torch light, “For I see something.”

Laughter erupted from the crowd and a rough hand slapped the old man on the back, “That’s no blade old eyes. Aye, though it is a small thing and make no mistake.”

“My fair bride!” shouted the fair young man who pushed his way to the front, “what manner of demon is this that lures maidens to his house! She has but barely escaped from that stone church where the bishop resides. This foul creature is what brought us misery not Arach! Away with him!”

At once a frightful roar of anger went up from the crowd and they picked up whatever they could find and began pelting the bishop. He shrieked and babbled nonsense from a wounded and drunken tongue and began frantically waving his arms and breaking wind with thunderous claps and belches.

“Quick,” Creirwy said in alarm, “he seeks to lay a curse upon us! He spits his blood at us and shall poison the ground!”

“Aye,” said another, “Hear how he lets fly honks to call his foul brethren and chokes us with his stench. I already grow faint from it. He must have devoured the bodies of the dead and now returns them to us!”

The townsfolk gave a roar and surged forward in rage at the mud-covered naked bishop. Pryderi and the young fair lad, who in truth was the Scottish elf Brinjal, leapt over the wall with stout strap and began laying blows while another man used a stick. The bishop howled in pain and struggled to get away. Soon women were over and gave him a thrashing with sticks.

“Careful,” shouted Creirwy, “the ways of the devil are crafty. He may yet get the best of you. Do not let him speak for he will utter a curse and call his fellow demons. He shall soon learn the meaning of the rod. For did not the good bishop tell us that evil must be driven from the land and spared no quarter?”

The bishop, fat and muddy as he was, could only groan and lumber heavily through knee deep mud while frantically trying to evade the blows raining down on him. On he went with the sounds of wood and leather resounding against his flesh as he strove on.

“Ho now!” cried Brinjal, “I grow weary, he is a stout one. Here comes Davyd and his hounds. They shall be delighted to bite this fiend.”

The bishop was now in absolute terror and found new strength amid the merciless beating. Unable to speak a word, he shrieked and babbled gibberish and strove to get away, certain at any moment he would be torn to pieces by the wolf hounds some of the neighbors kept.

“Aye,” said another man, “Dylan has his and Osian has that bear of a dog. This demon will make a fine bone to chew.”

The bishop was chased far across the field to the woods. The dogs had their own difficulty getting through the deep mud but were fresh. As the townsfolk quickly grew exhausted, the dogs continued and the terrified bishop was forced on. Only Brinjal seemed inexhaustible but no one seemed to notice or the curious fact that his feet never grew muddy. He could lightly spring over the mire without sinking. The mob lumbered after and drove the bishop over the fields and into the woods. Once out of the fields, the bishop pushed on getting cut and scratched by brambles and thickets that seemed to swat him from all sides. In the dark, no one could see the people of fairy who had lined up to get their own turn at punishment yet always guiding him towards the glade. He was chased deeper into the hills and through the woods, over the rim of the valley until he came to the very spot where he had cast salt into Arach’s eyes.

There, waiting for the panting, wheezing and thoroughly humiliated bishop was Arach. With a flick of his tail, the bishop slapped the bishop upon his fleshy haunches and sent him over the land into far away East Anglia where he struck his head upon a stone and became insensible. He thereafter wore a loincloth, dwelt in the wild and spent his long days preaching to the herds of livestock for their salvation. In Wales among Creirwy and Pryderi’s people, the demon disappeared from the land and prosperity quickly returned.

Basil Kernander

Suggested reading.

Welsh Fairytales and Other Stories, collected and edited by P.H. Emerson; 1894; D. Nutt, London.

British Goblins: Welsh folk-lore, fairy mythology, legends and traditions, by Wirt Sikes; 1880; London: Sampson and Low.

Welsh Fairy Tales, by William Elliot Griffis; New York : Thomas Y. Crowell Co., [c1921]

The Welsh Fairy Book, by W. Jenkin Thomas 1908

The Fairy Mythology Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries, by Thomas Keightley; London: George Bell & Sons, York St., Covent Garden, and New York 1892

Post Note

I have read that there are currently just shy of 900,000 Welsh speakers in the world. Icelandic, as a second example, has somewhere around 350,000 speakers. Considering the rich literary and cultural traditions of both groups that have fascinated and mesmerized large audiences, I find it unfortunate that there are not more enthusiasts that are able to read the original works. For subsequent generations all over the world, cherry picking ideas from literary traditions and incorporating those elements into something new is a historical norm. It is my sad realization to see a different pattern emerging and which I feel I must at least mention here. I freely admit with pride and iron conviction that I am partisan on this subject.

There now seems to be a trend of not simply paying a courtesy to the intellectual and creative labors of others. The effort today is not often seen as variations of stories like *The Volsungs, The Nibelungen*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. The language sources and themes have cultural context that becomes unique but familiar. Instead, at least in the United States, there is an irresistible desire and apparent addiction to hijack original works, gut them of substance and form, and repackage stories for the lowest common denominator that offends no one.

There is no creation and consistency with the original work, only a whitewashing and sanitizing. This has grown to the extent that this becomes akin to scouring a library and purging or simply re-writing anything that might not fit modern sensibilities. Instead, works are replaced with characters, language and storylines that reflect very little of the original source material, let alone any appreciation of the languages and cultures from which they arose. For many who place history, culture, language and the specific uses to which they were created and intended, this is deeply offensive and reflects a creative bankruptcy that can only offer the faint distorted echoes of something that is truly great. This has the unfortunate potential to sideline and push into obscurity, deliberately I think, all those original works to the dark basements beneath basements or incinerators due to discomfort or even the slightest offense and perceived injury to others. Such thin skin and fragile intellectual and emotional constitution is not the nature of an enduring legacy other than destruction.